SIGNS OF THE ZODIAC

Has the serial killer's code been cracked?

PRICING IN DISCLOSURE THE BANK OF ENGLAND VS ALIENS

SAI BABA'S BLACK SHEEP VENEZUELAN CULT FRICTION

PENNIES FROM HEAVEN RAINS OF GHOSTLY COINS

THE WORLD'S WEIRDEST NEWS

SURFING OTTERS · CHANGELINGS IN COURT · NEW SQUID ON THE BLOCK · IMMORTAL HERMIT

THE WORLD OF STRANGE PHENOMENA WWW.FORTEANTIMES.COM

ForteanTimes

FT468 MARCH 2026
£5.40

CHARIOTEER OF THE GODS

HOW ERICH VON DÄNIKEN TURNED ANCIENT ALIENS INTO BIG BUSINESS

ERICH VON DÄNIKEN
IN SEARCH OF THE GODS
REMNANTS OF THE GODS
ERICH VON DÄNIKEN
ARRIVAL OF THE GODS
REVEALING THE ALIEN LANDING SI
OF NAZCA
ERICH VON DÄNIKEN
MYSTERY PA
We Accept All Major Credit Cards

FILMING FOLKLORE

THE WELSH WEIRDNESS OF RABBIT TRAP

SPIRITS ON FLEET STREET

THE STRANGE CAREER OF HANNEN SWAFFER

SAVE UP TO £150

WINTER SAVINGS

This time of year doesn't have to be dark and miserable. If poor light is spoiling your ability to read, work or focus in comfort, you need a Serious Light. With a range of lights to suit all needs, don't miss your chance to purchase at these fantastically low prices.

GET UP TO £150 OFF PLUS FREE DELIVERY WHEN YOU QUOTE CODE F250 AT CHECKOUT

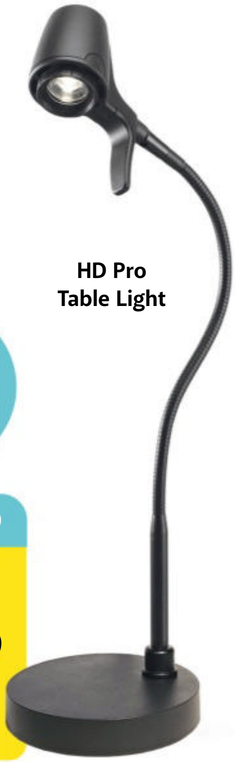
HD Pro Floor Light

High Definition Light Pro

The ultimate performance tool for when detail is critical. The HD Pro projects our most intense beam of full-spectrum daylight, delivering near perfect visual acuity. Uniquely, it lets you shape the beam, and offers cordless and remote options. It is a precision instrument giving you total control over the beam and brightness for any task, without compromise.

- **Up to TWELVE TIMES more light on your page than a traditional 60W bulb**
- **Ready for cordless and remote upgrades**
- **Recommended by 500+ opticians**
- **Extended 90 day risk-free home trial**

SAVE £150



HD Pro Table Light

FREE mystery gift worth up to £10 with code F250

HD Pro Floor Light	HD Pro Table Light
Was ~~£499.99~~	Was ~~£449.99~~
NOW £349.99	**NOW £299.99**

Quote offer code F250 at checkout or when calling.
Plus FREE delivery worth £12.95.

Perfect for the book lover...

...and the avid fan of arts & crafts

HURRY! ORDER TODAY WHILE STOCKS LAST!

FREE DELIVERY

HD ROAM Light

Read in comfort on the go. Lightweight, cordless, and ultraportable.

- **Dimmable daylight beam**
- **Up to 4.5 hours battery life**
- **Weighs under 1kg**

ONLY £99.99
PLUS FREE DELIVERY

SAVE £40

HD Mini Light

Crisper words in seconds. Slips on to any side table with ease.

- **Dimmable daylight beam**
- **Up to 5 hours battery life**
- **USB port to charge phones**

Was ~~£199.99~~
NOW £159.99
Plus FREE delivery worth £12.95.

feefo 2025 Trusted Platinum Merchant
4.9/5 (11,127 Reviews)

For Advice. For Information. To Order:
seriousreaders.com/F250
Or Call Freephone **0800 085 1088**

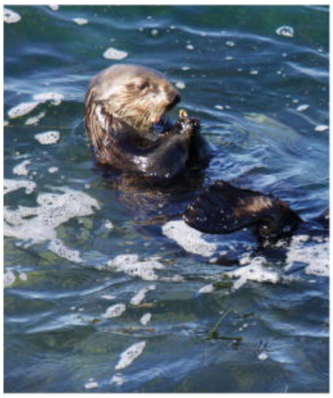
Serious Readers® Serious about light™

CONTENTS

Erich von Däniken

IMAGO / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

28 *Erich von Däniken: Charioteer of the Gods*



09 *Otter 841 returns...*

WELLCOME COLLECTION

50 *The living skeleton*

IMPAINT / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

40 *Hannen Swaffer's high spirits*

68 *The Hermit of Cadmore End*

ASSOCIATED PRESS / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

46 *Sai Baba, Nicolas Maduro and Venezuela's cult friction*

ForteanTimes
CHARIOTEER OF THE GODS

FORTEAN TIMES 468

Why fortean ?

Everything you always wanted to know about *Fortean Times* but were too paranoid to ask!

SEE PAGE 69

STRANGE DAYS

A digest of the worldwide weird, including: The Zodiac code, saucers vs bankers, surfing otters, freaky fungi and much more...

11 ARCHÆOLOGY
14 SCIENCE
18 GHOSTWATCH
22 ALIEN ZOO
23 THE CONSPIRASPHERE
26 THE UFO FILES

FEATURES

28 *COVER STORY*
CHARIOTEER OF THE GODS

JASON COLAVITO explores the life and work of Erich von Däniken, the bestselling Swiss author whose books turned the ancient astronaut theory into the gold of the gods.

36 SUPERNATURAL SOUNDSCAPES

1970s Wales, a fairy ring, an otherworldly child, repressed memories, hallucinatory landscapes and layers of menacing whispers and unsettling sounds. With these credentials, *Rabbit Trap* will appeal to connoisseurs of folklore, folk horror and hauntology. **MARIA J PÉREZ CUERVO** spoke to director **BRYN CHAINEY** about his debut feature film and its influences.

40 THE SPIRITUALIST POPE OF FLEET STREET

Campaigning tabloid journalist, Socialist firebrand and champion of Spiritualism, Hannen Swaffer was once a household name. **CATHI UNSWORTH** explores the life and times of one of the most neglected but fascinating figures in the history of the British press.

SERIES

46 STRANGE STATESMEN
Baba's Black Sheep **SD TUCKER**

68 PECULIAR POSTCARDS
The Hermit of Cadmore End **JAN BONDESON**

FORUM

50 Weight loss: a word of 'worming' **MARK GREENER**
52 A village haunting **LIZ HODGKINSON**

REGULARS

02 EDITORIAL
55 REVIEWS
63 LETTERS
69 READER INFO
70 PHENOMENOMIX
72 STRANGE DEATHS

ForteanTimes

EDITOR
DAVID SUTTON
drsutton@forteantimes.com

FOUNDING EDITORS
BOB RICKARD (bobrickard@mail.com)
PAUL SIEVEKING (sieveking@forteantimes.com)

NEWS EDITOR
IAN SIMMONS (simmons@forteantimes.com)

ART DIRECTOR
ETIENNE GILFILLAN (etienne@forteantimes.com)

BOOK REVIEWS EDITOR
DAVID V BARRETT (dvbarrett@forteantimes.com)

EDITORIAL ASSISTANT
ABIGAIL MASON

RESIDENT CARTOONIST
HUNT EMERSON

PRODUCTION MANAGER
LEE BOYMAN (lee.boyman@metropolis.co.uk)

ADVERTISING
JAMES KELLOCK (james.kellock@metropolis.co.uk)

FT ON THE INTERNET

www.forteantimes.com
www.facebook.com/forteantimes
Twitter/X: @forteantimes

FORTEAN TIMES is produced for Diamond Publishing Limited, a member of the Metropolis Group, by **WILD TALENTS LTD.** Postal address: Fortean Times, PO BOX 1200, Whitstable CT1 9RH.

SUBSCRIPTIONS
UK DD 6 Issues: £29.95 / 1 Year 13 Issues: £55.95
EUR/USA & CANADA 1 Year 13 Issues: £71.95
Rest of World 1 Year 13 Issues: £79.95

TO CHANGE YOUR ADDRESS, RENEW YOUR SUBSCRIPTION OR REPORT PROBLEMS:
hello@metropolis.co.uk / +44 (0) 208 752 8195

LICENSING & SYNDICATION
FORTEAN TIMES is available for international licensing and Syndication
Managing Director
David Saunders TEL: +44 (0) 208 752 8195
david.saunders@metropolis.co.uk

DISTRIBUTED IN UK, IRELAND AND WORLDWIDE
by 121-141 Westbourne Terrace, London W2 6QA
0330 390 6464 **Email: Hello@Marketforce.co.uk**

diamondpublishing

PUBLISHED BY DIAMOND PUBLISHING LIMITED.
A MEMBER OF THE METROPOLIS GROUP.

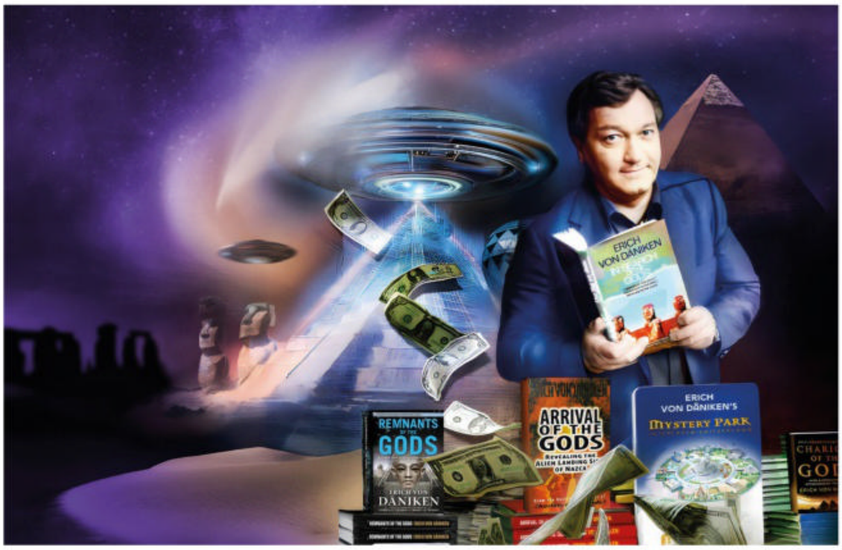
Fortean Times (ISSN 0308-5899, PE 23226) is published monthly with an extra issue in August by Diamond Publishing, 4th Floor, Harmsworth House, 13–15 Bouverie Street, London EC4Y 8DP, United Kingdom. Airfreight and mailing in the USA by agent named World Container Inc., c/o BBT 150-15, 183rd St, Jamaica, NY 11413, USA. Periodicals postage paid at Brooklyn, NY 11256. **POSTMASTER**: Send address changes to Fortean Times, World Container Inc., c/o BBT 150-15, 183rd St, Jamaica, NY 11413, USA.
© Diamond Publishing Limited: FEBRUARY 2026

GPSR EU RP
MPI Media
23 Fitzwilliam Street Upper, Dublin 2, D02 DF74, Republic of Ireland
Tel: 1 8176370
Hello@mpimedia.ie

General Product Safety 2023/988: The use of our product under normal or reasonably foreseeable conditions of use, including the actual duration of use, does not present any risk or only the minimum risks compatible with the product's use, which are considered acceptable and consistent with a high level of protection of the health and safety of consumers.

EDITORIAL

CAPUCINE DESLOUIS



ETIENNE GILFILLAN

DEPARTURE OF THE GODS

We mark a particularly notable fortean departure this month with the death of Erich von Däniken, whose bestselling books about ancient astronauts and gods from outer space – starting with *Chariots of the Gods?* in 1968 – kickstarted a whole subgenre of popular forteana, making him a celebrity in the process. Von Däniken may have borrowed his ideas from earlier authors (in the same way that he, ahem, 'borrowed' money in his previous career as a Swiss hotelier), but it was *Chariots* and its sequels that propelled alternative archæology and ancient aliens into both the counterculture and the mainstream in the 1970s and beyond. Countless imitators have continued to explore these subjects in books, TV programmes and conventions to this day, but their debt to von Däniken is undeniable. You'll find his Necrolog entry on p.24, while Jason Colavito assesses the man, his work and his legacy in greater depth in our cover story (p.28).

Speaking of the recently departed, we'd like to offer a fond tip of the hat to the late Bob Weir of the Grateful Dead. We've explored the links between the Dead and the fortean world in these pages a few time over the years, but a favourite personal memory is of the time the FT crew met up with Bobby in a Scottish pub (long story) and presented him and his band with a stack of back issues of *Fortean Times*. He seemed very pleased, if somewhat bemused, by this introduction to British forteana...

ERRATA

FT461:22: Mark Pearson spotted a mistake in one of the picture captions for Joe Nickell's obituary, noting that "there is a photo of Nickell next to his Nazca 'Giant Condor', when it is very clearly the Giant Spider!"

FT462:14: With regard to David Hambling's Science column 'Robot Fakes and Frauds', Julie Speedie of York writes: "It would not have been George VI who declined to open the Exhibition of the Society of Model Engineers in 1928 – he did not ascend to the throne until 1936. It would in fact have been his father, George V. As far as one knows, the latter had no particular interest in robotics or automatons – his passions were game shooting and, famously, stamp collecting."

FT462:16: The photo of Alan Gauld was attributed wrongly to Gonville & Caius College, Cambridge; it should have been: Chroma Collection/Alamy Stock Photo.

FT466:10: Chris Dean of Builth Wells, Powys, expressed doubts regarding the news item about 'Canine Van-dal' Reggie causing Jody Lovat's car to crash: "I find it extremely hard to believe that a French bulldog could even access the handbrake cable of a van from the cabin, let alone chew through it. It would be a braided steel cable 3-4mm thick, well beyond the teeth of even some mutant hell hound." Chris was right to be sceptical; see this month's 'Fortean Follow-Ups' (pp.8-9) for an update – Reggie is innocent!

ForteanTimes

COVER ILLUSTRATION
ETIENNE GILFILLAN

ERICH VON DÄNIKEN
IMAGO/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

PRINTED BY PRECISION COLOUR PRINTING

The
Ghastling

A biannual magazine of ghost stories,
folk horror, the macabre and the oh-so-strange. *For those that dwell in the darkness...*

SUBSCRIBE, SUBMIT, BE SCARED

THEGHASTLING.COM

A DIGEST OF THE WORLDWIDE WEIRD

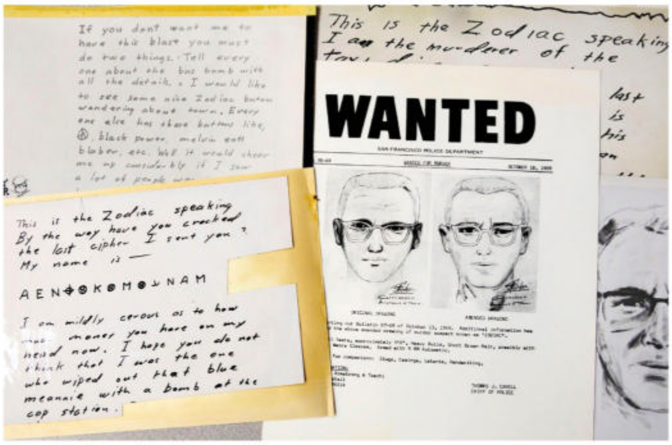
STRANGE DAYS

SIGNS OF THE ZODIAC

Two killers for the price of one as US codebreaker links Zodiac and Black Dahlia cases

In 1968 and 1969, the San Francisco Bay Area was haunted by a mysterious serial killer who carried out five apparently random murders, then, for years afterwards, teased the police and media with letters and encoded cryptograms in which he referred to himself as "Zodiac", but was never caught. Many of his coded messages were quickly deciphered, and most of those that were not have yielded their secrets to determined codebreakers in the years since; one, though, resisted all attempts to crack it. Known as the Z13 cipher, it was sent to the *San Francisco Chronicle* in April 1970 in response to a challenge by the American Cryptogram Association, who publicly dared Zodiac to put his real name in a code. He took the bait, responding with a letter reading "My name is…" and a 13-character string of letters and symbols, but not only did the American Cryptogram Association fail to decipher the puzzle, everyone who has tried to break it since has failed too.

Now, cryptography obsessive Alex Baber, who runs a firm called Cold Case Consultants of America in West Virginia, believes he has broken the Z13 cryptogram, and claims that he has not only discovered the true identity of the Zodiac Killer, but has connected him to another infamous Californian murder, The Black Dahlia. The victim of that crime was a 22-year-old aspiring actress named Elizabeth Short, dubbed "The Black Dahlia" by the media, whose mutilated corpse was found on an empty lot in South Los Angeles in January 1947. She had been neatly sawn in half at the waist with what was deemed surgical skill, and had been carefully posed by the killer. There was no blood at the scene, so Short had clearly met her death elsewhere, although that location was never identified, and while a number of suspects were questioned, her killer evaded justice (see **FT334:48-54**).



If you dont want me to have this blast you must do two things. Tell every one about the bus bomb with all the details. I would like to see some nice Zodiac butons wandering about town. Every one else has these buttons like, ☮, black power, melvin eats bluber, etc. Well it would cheer me up considerably if I saw a lot of people wea

This is the Zodiac speaking
By the way have you cracked
the last cipher I sent you?
My name is —
AEN⊕⊗K⊗M⊗⊥NAM
I am mildly cerous as to how much money you have on my head now. I hope you do not think that I was the one who wiped out that blue meannie with a bomb at the cop station.

This is the Zodiac speaking
I am the murderer of the

WANTED
SAN FRANCISCO POLICE DEPARTMENT
last
is
his

295-7
1-15-

LEFT: A San Francisco Police Department wanted bulletin and copies of letters sent to the *San Francisco Chronicle* by Zodiac. **BELOW LEFT**: The scene of Elizabeth Short's 1947 murder.

ASSOCIATED PRESS / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Zodiac teased the police with letters and encoded cryptograms

To crack Z13, Baber says, "I started running variables based on letter-frequency analysis." He then used artificial intelligence to generate a list of 71 million possible 13-letter names based on his findings. Once he had this, he systematically cross-checked those names against military, marriage, census and other public records to whittle down the potential solutions. "This takes me nine months of working 18-20 hour days," Baber said. "I'm starting to kill this onion. I'm starting to eliminate layers: Too tall, too short, or wrong race," but eventually he homed in on one name buried in the code: "Marvin Merrill". Marvin Merrill turned out to be an alias of one of the suspects in the Short killing, Marvin Margolis, who adopted the name when he moved to Chicago not long after Short's murder, effectively dropping off police radar and frustrating any further attempts to interview him. By the 1960s, though, he was back in California, in time for the Zodiac killings, and remained there until his death in Santa Barbara, aged 68, in July 1993.

Margolis was questioned by police after Short's murder, but was eliminated as a suspect because he had an alibi for the time when they believed Short had been killed. However, it seems likely that the cops had the wrong timeline for the killing, meaning they didn't question him about where he was at the true time of Short's murder. This is not known, so Margolis could still be the killer. Also, a key fact that Margolis withheld from the police was that he knew Short well, and had lived with her for 12 days, three months before her death. A policewoman who encountered Short shortly before her murder found her sobbing in fear and was told that an ex-boyfriend was stalking her and wanted to kill her, a boyfriend she said had been a Marine.

Margolis had been interviewed because he was a 21-year-old pre-med student at the University of Southern California Medical School, and police were looking for someone with medical skills. He had also been a Marine combat medic during the War, and suffered PTSD from the experience, resulting in a discharge from the

THEY DO LIKE IT UP 'EM

More ill-advised insertions, from eggs to eels

PAGE 6

COLOURFUL CREATURES

Orange shark and new squid on the block

PAGE 22

BRAZILIAN ROSWELL

The Varginha aliens revisited on screen

PAGE 26

Marines. A military psychologist described Margolis at the time as "a resentful individual who shows ample evidence of open aggression". Although apparently eager to begin a career as a surgeon, Margolis never qualified, abruptly dropping out of USC after being questioned, changing his name, and moving to Chicago. There, he went on to hold a variety of jobs, working as a builder, architect and portrait painter, as well as running a restaurant and managing a car repair workshop once he returned to the West Coast.

Using the ruse that he was interested in his father's military career, Baber approached Margolis's son, Roark Merrill, although once he had made contact, Baber swiftly revealed his interest in the Black Dahlia killing, and was shown a drawing Roark had inherited from his father. Margolis had sketched this towards the end of his life, in 1992; it was entitled "Elizabeth" and showed a woman closely resembling Elizabeth Short, naked from the waist up, with no lower half visible, as if cut off at the navel. One of her nipples appeared to be severed and there were also marks that might be stab wounds, and shading that suggested blood. Although photos of Short's corpse had been public since the mid-1980s, when Kenneth Anger included them in *Hollywood Babylon II*, to Baber and others the drawing was detailed enough to suggest first-hand knowledge of her murder. In addition, when examined with infrared filters, the word "Zodiac" appeared hidden in the shading. Roark Merrill has subsequently refused to comment on the drawing, provide further access to it, or to allow its publication.

To confirm his findings, Baber enlisted two veteran LAPD homicide detectives, Rick Jackson, who had been on the force for 36 years, and Mitzi Roberts, who had been in the LAPD's cold case unit and had worked on reviews of the Short murder. Having been inundated with imaginative theories about the Short killing over the years, they were initially sceptical of Baber's claims. However, on examining his findings and probing them for flaws, they found Baber's work convincing, going as far as enlisting Ed Giorgio, a mathematician who had been chief codemaker and codebreaker for the National Security Agency to check over Baber's solution to the Z13 cipher. "All of Alex's work checked out to me," he said. To verify his work, Giorgio then had it double checked by two other former NSA cryptomathematicians, Patrick Henry and Rich Wisniewski. They, too, found the solution convincing, and there was the added bonus that Henry found the key word used to generate the Z13 cipher had been "Elizabeth". "The probability that anything else is correct is orders of magnitude smaller," concluded Giorgio. As a result, Jackson says, "In my opinion, these are solved cases," adding "There are too many links with both. There's overwhelming circumstantial evidence. He's left breadcrumbs all along."

ALEX BABER / COLD CASE CONSULTANTS

ABOVE: Alex Baber believes he has cracked Zodiac's Z13 cryptogram and identified the killer as Marvin Margolis, a suspect also linked to the 1947 Black Dahlia murder.

As well as fingering Marvin Margolis as both the Zodiac and Black Dahlia Killer, Baber believes he has found the place where Short was murdered and dismembered: a motel located at 2615 Santa Fe Avenue, Compton. This was made up of stand-alone bungalows, which had bathtubs, a rarity in LA motels in 1947. Newspaper accounts from 1947 reported that on the night before Short is now believed to have been murdered, a nervous young man had been touring motels in the area, asking urgently if they had a room with a bathtub for his wife. The killer would have had needed a bathtub or something similar to dismember Short in, so that the blood was contained and easy to wash away. It seems likely he found what he was seeking at 2615 Santa Fe Avenue, which, at the time, Baber discovered, was called the Zodiac Motel. "That was the key to where she was murdered as well as his future moniker," Baber says. While the NSA cryptographers and both the retired LAPD detectives are convinced by Baber's findings, and they have made the LAPD aware of them, Roberts says, "It's not a burning thing on their radar right now, I don't think the LAPD will ever take a position and say it's solved." *latimes.com, patch.com, 23 Dec 2025.*

EXTRA! EXTRA!

FT'S FAVOURITE HEADLINES FROM AROUND THE WORLD

MAYOR URGES PEOPLE NOT TO EAT PUBLIC TOILET SEATS

Pulse Tasmania, 30 Dec 2025.

……

Woman slams selfish paragliders who "made her think Hamas were invading Doncaster"

D. Mirror, 17 Oct 2023.

……

CONCERN AFTER TEENS GATHER AND FIGHT WITH BAT

BBC News, 19 Jan 2026.

……

Man lures date into sex dungeon on Christmas Eve and eats his genitals

D. Mirror, 25 Dec 2025.

SIDELINES

SAW DELIGHT

Shane Reimche, 43, was not expecting drama when he visited Quicktrips Neighborhood Market in Eugene, Oregon, to pick up some orange juice, but as he stepped through the door, he heard someone yelling, followed by a clanging noise. Nearby utility workers had lost control of a circular saw, sending a razor-sharp four-foot diameter blade barrelling across the street. This embedded itself in the shop door a fraction of a second after Reimche closed it, with an impact that shook the entire building. "I almost just died!" he said and went home with a beer instead of the orange juice. *oregonianlive.com, 4 Apr 2024.*

LUCK OF THE BEAST

An anonymous man from Owosso, Michigan, won big on the state lottery's Jackpot Slots Millionaire game with the numbers 6-6-6, traditionally the ill-omened Number of the Beast from the Book of Revelation. Instead, these landed him a $2.39 million Fast Cash prize, the largest ever won on the game. "I was absolutely shocked to see that I had hit the jackpot. We started celebrating in the store," he said. Elsewhere, a lottery player from Fort Washington, Maryland, used the last five digits of her car's mileage to win $100,000 on the local Pick 5 lottery. *cbsnews.com, 25 Mar; local12.com, 5 Apr 2025.*

A NAKED MAN...

Police in Lytham, Lancashire are on the look out for a man wearing nothing but a pair of black and white trainers and a black gimp mask after he was filmed walking along a residential street in the early hours of 18 July. Police said that the occurrence had not been reported to them at the time, and that they had only become aware of it after the video had been circulated locally on social media. *<i> 14 Aug 2025.*

MARTIN ROSS

INFELICITOUS INSERTIONS

They still like it up 'em...

ABOVE: A photo claiming to show the foot-long eel removed from a Chinese man's abdominal cavity.

A BRUSH WITH DISASTER

After waiting 12 hours in agony, a 43-year-old man turned up at Soetomo General Academic Hospital in East Java, Indonesia, exhibiting an "eggplant deformity" of the penis – the tell-tale sign of a penile fracture. The article on the case in the *International Journal of Surgery Case Reports* explains: "The patient sustained a penile injury during sexual intercourse in the woman-on-top position the night before". There is nothing particularly extraordinary about a man of this age receiving such an injury during energetic intercourse, but what was unusual was what medics found when they operated. The ultimate cause of the injury turned out to be a toothbrush the man had inserted into his penis that had snapped during intercourse and severely damaged the organ. Eventually, the victim admitted that in 2017 he had made a small incision in his penis, into which he inserted a toothbrush for his "sexual satisfaction", and since then had kept one in there permanently, although whether this was the same toothbrush throughout was unclear. He said the insertion had not caused him any issues before his accident. It required a two hour operation to extract the broken toothbrush and repair the man's penis, but he was able to be discharged after three days and did not suffer any complications. *dailymail.co.uk, 20 Mar 2024.*

EEL MEET AGAIN

In what might be expected to be an utterly unique case, but which turns out to be something that happens with worrying frequency, a 33-year-old man turned up at the First Affiliated Hospital of Hunan Medical University in Hunan, China, sweating profusely, with a pale face and excruciating abdominal pain. As his abdomen was already extremely hard, medics rushed him in for a CT scan, which showed a foreign object that had pierced his colon and ended up in his abdominal cavity. Fearing peritonitis, they made a small incision to insert a laparoscope to explore the man's abdomen. Once inside, they were shocked to find the foreign object was a foot-long (30cm) live eel swimming among the man's organs. Fortunately, medics were able to grab the fish with forceps and pull it out, after which they sutured the hole in the colon and flushed the whole abdominal cavity with saline to reduce the risk of infection. The man recovered quickly and was discharged from hospital after a few days. He didn't explain how the eel might have ended up in his colon, but as one commenter said: "Everyone knows how he got it in." *vice.com, 9 July 2025.*

The man didn't explain how the eel had ended up in his colon

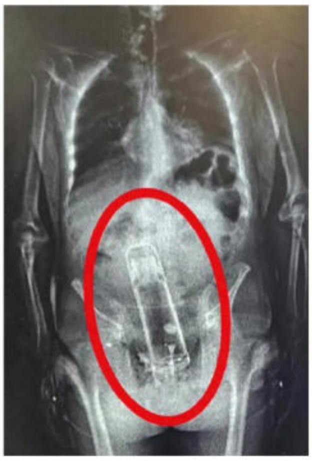
RECTAL ROUNDUP

Every year, the US Consumer Product Safety Commission publishes a roundup of noteworthy entries to that year's database of emergency room visits, including visits to extract things jammed in orifices. The summary is light on detail, often just the name of the item and the orifice it was found stuck in, but each one no doubt came with a startling tale of woe.

For "Penis" the list includes: battery, candle wax, chess piece, two glass beads, pen, pencil, comb, apple stems, apple core, bobby pin, paper clip, magnets, spring, screw, staples, thermometer, headphones, guitar string, and Allen wrench, some of which must have required considerable ingenuity, not to say effort, to get where they really shouldn't have been. Not to be outdone, many women managed to get extraordinary things jammed in their genitals, with the "Vagina" list being even more extensive: holiday bell, lighter, aluminum foil, cotton balls, popsicle stick, plastic orca, gemstone, latex glove, bath bomb, small plastic mermaid, flower toy, bracelet charms, two vibrators, two penis rings, two spoons, a hairbrush, a detergent pod and a plunger cap.

Other entries did give a bit of context, including "inserted two diamond rings in her vagina while at a party in fear they would be stolen", "reports a bag of marijuana has been in her vagina for two days and is uncomfortable", and, for a beer bottle, "was on a cruise on her honeymoon". Another patient explained that she "was using

POLK COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE



LEFT: Polk County Sheriff Grady Judd holds up a photo of Walter Frymire. The thermos on Judd's desk was, he estimated, the same size as the one stuck up Frymire's "exit ramp". **BELOW**: An X-ray showing the actual thermos in situ.

a piece of plastic to masturbate when got spooked by the wind outside and threw the sheet over herself, in the process lodging the piece of plastic deeper into her vagina and wasn't able to retrieve it."

The "Rectum" category is gender neutral, and also contains many gems, with a degree of variety that is testament to the richness of the human imagination. Here, we get more of the stories behind the hospital visits: "Patient states he put a baseball in his rectum to see what it felt like"; "Was feeling constipated for two days, he took the base off of his beard clippers and wrapped in a plastic baggie, inserted into the rectum and it got stuck"; "Concern about if he still had a small vibrator in his rectum. His girlfriend placed it there on Friday"; and of course, the old excuse, "Reports he slipped in the shower, and a shampoo bottle went into his rectum".

Others were more forthright about their problem: "States he was in the shower 'was bored' so placed shampoo bottle into rectum"; "Had gone out with wife last night and had too many drinks, went home drunk, wife inserted a rubbery sex toy into patient's rectum, unable to remove"; "Reports seven-inch dildo inserted into rectum when it accidentally went too far. He attempted to use pliers to remove it. Pliers stuck too"; "Plastic coat hanger inside his anus. He inserted the hanger during sexual activity. He cut off the outside of the hanger so he could drive to the ER"; "He inserted a light bulb into his rectum this morning with the glass side first and due to the suction effect, the bulb got sucked up"; "Possible rectal foreign body. She reports placing a small vibrator in her rectum, she does not remember removing it and cannot find it"; "Reports using a butt plug in her anus a few hours ago when it broke off. Significant other used tweezers to retrieve piece that broke off. Tweezers now stuck in rectum"; "States he has a foreign body in his rectum that is vibrating. He states he was with a girl last night and doesn't remember much"; "Was being intimate with his girlfriend and they shoved a rectangular travel toothbrush holder in his rectum, was able to get half of it out"; "Reports having a six-inch vibrator in rectum since 2pm today. Doesn't recall placing vibrator in rectum. Also reported taking 'poppers' at the time".

Also among the things put where the Sun doesn't shine were: lubricant bottle, enema bottle, screws and nails, aerosol can, dog chew toy, dryer sheet, baton, hair tie, turkey baster, plastic cleanser bottle (full of liquid), dental pick, wine stopper, corn cob holder, highlighter, invisible marker, magic wand toy, marbles, film canister, battery-powered light, penny, sandal, doorknob, flashlight, vape pen, two pencils, corncob-style pipe, rubber gasket, uncooked pasta, piece of nose hair trimmer, eyeglasses, rock, egg, multiple sex toys, cat-headed vibrator, and a 24-inch (61cm) dildo. *defector.com, 25 Dec 2025.*

"UP THE EXIT RAMP"

Grady Judd, Sheriff of Polk County, Florida, explained that the incident started with reports of a naked man in a public toilet. "We got a call that he was naked inside of a restroom at a public park, so we asked – is he naked or buck naked? You can be naked and still have your socks on, but if you're buck naked you are totally naked," he said.

When deputies arrived, they found Walter Frymire, 51, now fully clothed, and arrested him, taking him to Polk County Jail. On arrival, Frymire was put through a routine body scan, which revealed that he had a large thermos flask jammed up his rectum. Asked what it was doing there, Frymire said, "Well, I put that inside my body," or, as sheriff Judd helpfully explained, "He put it up the exit ramp, you know what I mean." He added: "We had to take him to the hospital. They had to find a specialist. It was quite the ordeal, but he's thermos-less in the county jail today." Judd explained that the deputy who brought Frymire in had probably saved his life by finding the thermos, although Frymire had still threatened to kill him for putting him under arrest. *foxnews13.com, 8 Oct 2025.*

SIDELINES

FLORIDA MAN

Police were called to a house in Davenport, Florida, after a neighbour who was watching the property while its owners were away spotted suspicious activity. Gaining entry, the neighbour found a man, named only as Joe, 44, cooking dinner, having already run a bath for himself. He admitted to police that he had broken into the property and had been living there for several days because he had had a row with his wife and was scared to go home, but they still arrested him for breaking and entering. *nypost.com, 21 Jun 2025.*

FLORIDA MAN II

After receiving reports of an "unusual vehicle" being driven on the Suncoast Parkway, police in Tampa, Florida, pulled in Christopher Spain, 38, and arrested him for driving under the influence. He had been attempting to circumvent the drunk driving laws by travelling home on a ride-on lawnmower moving at 5mph, but soon found that the law applies, whatever vehicle you are using. *D.Mirror, 26 Jul 2025.*

FLORIDA MAN III

Henry Antunez-Alvarado, 25, did not take kindly to being asked to leave the Planet Fitness gym in San Carlos Park, Florida. Instead, he stripped naked and ran amok in what was described as "a bizarre blend of yoga, parkour and arson". He attempted to burn the gym down, hurtled naked around the building, then climbed onto the ceiling "like a raccoon". Police eventually found him hiding in a tanning bed, still naked. *D.Mirror, 2 Aug 2025.*

SWANSONG

Anders Fernstedt, a homeless man who had set up camp on the doorstep of a grand house in London's Rutland Gate near Hyde Park, was known as "the Swan Whisperer" by locals because he spent much of his time hanging out with the park swans. However, he ended up in Southwark Crown Court as a result of his obsession after he attacked voluntary swan warden Jon Ferguson, who had ordered Fernstedt to stop "stroking, cuddling and kissing" a swan because of the risk of spreading bird flu. He also went on to assault a local filming the altercation, earning him a ban from the park and a 15-month community order. *D. Telegraph, 19 June 2025.*

SIDELINES...

DOWNLOAD UPLOADS

Police asked people attending the Download heavy metal festival to put any wearable technology into airplane mode for the duration of the event to stop it making automatic emergency calls. Smart watches and similar devices are programmed to send emergency messages when they detect that wearers have been in a collision, but cannot differentiate between an accident and energetic moshing, This results in hundreds of automatic calls from the festival, which, police said, stretches call handlers and diverts resources from genuine emergencies. *BBC News, 13 Jun 2025.*

TELEPORTATION?

The road management company National Highways remains baffled as to how 80 heavyweight traffic cones could have gone missing from a site near North Burlingham in Norfolk, where they had been placed in preparation for work later in the day. They vanished between 6.55 and 7.30am on 22 July, but despite them having been removed from the central reservation of the busy A47, no one saw them being taken. *BBC News, 24 Jul 2025.*

BERNAPOO

Having taken in a rescue puppy they thought was a cockapoo, a cross between a cocker spaniel and a poodle, Laura McFarlane, 43, and James Griffiths, 51, from Pontypridd, Wales, soon found it was growing much faster than other dogs of the same breed. Normally, cockapoos weigh around two stone (12.7kg) but before long, their dog Bobby weighed seven stone (44.5kg) and was eating three huge meals a day. Genetic tests revealed that while Bobby looked like a cockapoo, he was actually a cross between a poodle and a giant Bernese mountain dog. McFarlane and Griffiths insist "Bobby is no trouble to us." *Sun 8 July 2025.*

MARTIN ROSS

FORTEAN FOLLOW-UPS

Sonic weapons, human chimeras and bad otters

HAVANA SYNDROME [FT446:25]

The US Defense Department is reported to have spent more than a year testing a device that investigators believe could be behind the mysterious "Havana Syndrome" that has afflicted US spies and diplomats across the world. First reported by diplomats in Havana, Cuba, in 2016, the "anomalous health incidents (AHIs)" that make up the syndrome have symptoms consistent with head trauma, including vertigo and extreme headaches, and in some cases, seem to have led to long-term disabilities for the sufferers. The prime suspect for their cause is thought to be a directed energy weapon using either pulsed electromagnetic energy or sound waves.

However, scientists have struggled to explain how such a device could be made portable enough to work in the field and still be able to target victims at a distance, and the investigation has been further hampered by there being no clear definition of an anomalous health incident. In addition, different parts of the US security establishment have very different views as to whether the cases involve genuine attacks or are some sort of social panic. The Office of the Director of National Intelligence says that the syndrome involves "pre-existing conditions, conventional illnesses, and environmental factors," as does the CIA, while the National Security Agency (NSA) thinks there is a "roughly even chance" it involves attacks by a foreign adversary.

It is claimed that a division of the US Department of Homeland Security – Homeland Security Investigations – bought the device for millions of dollars after an undercover investigation, although it is not clear where they got it from, or its exact nature. It does, though, apparently produce pulsed radio waves, and it is reported that although the device is not entirely Russian in origin, it contains Russian components, and could fit in a backpack. One problem with Havana Syndrome has been that the US has never been able to securely pin any incidents on a foreign adversary, but as they appear to have bought the mysterious device on the black market, it is possible that there has been a degree of proliferation, and that several different US adversaries could be using the devices in attacks. Speaking for the victims, Marc Polymeropoulos, a CIA officer attacked in Moscow in 2017, said, "If the [US Government] has indeed uncovered such devices, then the CIA owes all the victims a f**king major and public apology for how we have been treated as pariahs."

ETIENNE GILFILLAN

There were also allegations that US troops involved in the invasion of Venezuela on 3 January, during which President Maduro was captured (see p46), deployed some sort of sonic or directed energy weapon similar to those linked to the Havana Syndrome. Venezuelan troops guarding the presidential complex reported that as soon as US troops attacked, they experienced what felt like an "intense sound wave" that allegedly caused "mass incapacitation", including severe headaches, nosebleeds, vomiting blood and paralysis. One of the guards graphically described the incident, saying, "Suddenly I felt like my head was exploding from the inside. We all started bleeding from the nose. Some were vomiting blood. We fell to the ground, unable to move." These symptoms differ from those suffered by Havana Syndrome victims, and are far more extreme. National security lawyer Mark Zaid, who represents Havana Syndrome victims, admitted that the US has "captured and studied devices potentially linked to AHIs", but said these devices were not used in the Venezuela raid, and called the allegations "baseless".

LEFT: Retired CIA officer Marc Polymeropoulos, who was attacked in Moscow in 2017.

Others have suggested the story may be an intimidation tactic or psychological warfare, rather than a credible report, or that Venezuelan troops are making the claim to excuse their poor performance against the Delta Force attack. *editions.cnn.com, wionews.com, 13 Jan; sashaingber.substack.com, 12 Jan 2026.* For more on this long-running saga, see **FT359:22, 360:14, 363:4, 370:26-27, 382:10-11, 389:26-27, 401:9, 407:21, 411:26, 414:8, 417:28 , 426:14, 430:7, 431:26, 446:25.**

CANINE VAN-DAL [FT466:10]

When his van, occupied only by a French bulldog named Reggie, careered through Knaresborough in Yorkshire, Jody Lovat blamed the dog, saying that he had chewed through the brake cable. The Vauxhall Combi hurtled down a steep hill, ploughed through a level crossing, rammed a signal box and came to rest athwart the railway line between Harrogate and York, causing serious disruption and £22,000 worth of damage. However, appearing in magistrates court over the incident, Lovat, 49, exonerated Reggie, explaining that he had been trying to restart his broken-down vehicle himself, and was pushing it out of the road when he lost control and it rolled away. Prosecutor Sarah Tyrer said the incident involved “negligence or incompetence rather than malicious damage” and Lovat pleaded guilty to the charge of careless driving and of endangering safety of persons conveyed by the railway. *BBC News, 15 Jan 2026.*

OTTER 841 [FT436:9, 439:22]

ForteanTimes
UFOs OVER AMERICA

After a lengthy hiatus, surfboard-loving Otter 841 seems to have returned to her old tricks off Santa Cruz, California. Surfer Isabella Orduna was paddling her board when she felt a “nip” on her foot, so rolled off and turned to see an otter climbing onto her board. The otter took her board hostage for 20 minutes, repelling any attempts by Orduna to reclaim it, until another surfer called lifeguards, who were able to wrest the board away from the animal. Otter 841, named after the number of her tracking tag, went on a surfboard-stealing spree in 2023, aggressively evicting more than a dozen surfers from their boards and then sitting on them until forced off, but gave up the practice towards the end of the year when she gave birth to a cub. It is unclear whether the latest surfboard thief really is Otter 841 or a copycat, as 841’s tracking tag has now fallen off, making it impossible to confirm her identity for certain. *abc-7news.com, 16 Oct 2025.*

GENETIC CHIMERAS [FT467:16]

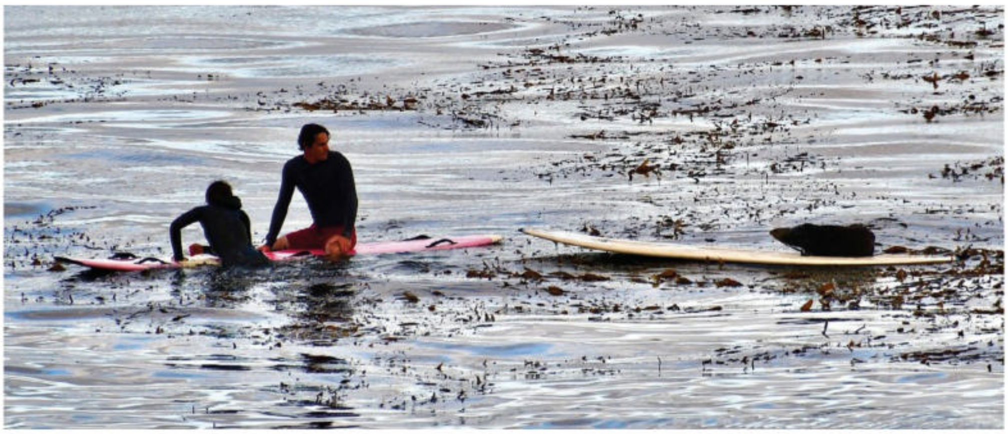
ForteanTimes
WIZARD OF GLASTONBURY

The forensic investigation of a murder in China led to a strange discovery. The victim was a 60-year-old woman, killed by a gunshot, but analysis of blood from the crime scene found cells containing Y chromosomes, which are usually only found in males. This initially led investigators to suspect some of the blood came from a second, unknown, person who had also been present at the crime scene. Further tests, though, revealed this not to be the case: they showed that the woman was a genetic chimera whose body was made up of a mixture of female cells, with the expected XX chromosomes, and male cells, with both X and Y chromosomes.

Human bodies are made up of trillions of cells, each of which contains the genetic instructions for their growth and activity on 23 chromosomes in the nucleus. Male and female cells have 22 chromosomes in common, but while in females the 23rd chromosome is a duplicate of the X chromosome, in males it is a small vestigial chromosome known as the Y chromosome. These determine the differences between the biological sexes. Normally, all the cells in someone’s body have an identical set of chromosomes, and are clearly identifiable as male or female, but in very rare cases, a person can have a body made up of two populations of genetically distinct cells, which can be of the same sex, or both sexes, depending on how the two populations originated; these are known as chimeras.

Sometimes, chimeras have different cell populations making up separate parts of the body, but in this case they were mixed, with different tissues having different proportions of XX and XY chromosomes. In the woman’s hair sample, most of the cells were XY, but her kidneys contained an equal mix of XX and XY, while the other 16 tissues tested were predominantly XX, with the XY cells appearing in varying smaller ratios. Often, the two populations of cells come from the embryos of a pair of non-identical twins that fused in the womb at an early stage of development, but not always. In the case of the Chinese murder victim, who was an XX/XY (female/male) chimera, the X chromosomes in both populations of cells were identical. This could only have come about if the two populations originated from a single egg that divided to form two separate eggs that were then individually fertilised, forming male and female embryos, that went on to fuse again, becoming what is known as a trigametic chimera.

It is not clear how common chimeras are, as most go through life without ever discovering their unusual genetic makeup, but among those that are known, trigametic chimeras are vanishingly rare, particularly ones that are XX/XY. *newscientist.com, 2 Jan 2026.*



MARK WOODWARD / NATIVE SANTACRUZ

ABOVE: A sea otter takes possession of Isabella Orduna’s surf board after biting her foot. Otter 841 strikes again?

SIDELINES...

AMBASSADOR OF SHADOWS

Near Dehli in India, police swooped on Harshvardhan Jain, 47, and arrested him for running a bogus embassy from a residential building. They impounded several cars with fake diplomatic plates and found a large number of doctored photographs claiming to show Jain with world leaders, as well as fake seals of India’s foreign ministry and nearly three dozen other countries. Jain is alleged to have impersonated an ambassador to scam people out of money by promising overseas employment. He was claiming to represent the countries of Seborgia and Westarctica, which are real, but unrecognised, micronations, although it is unclear whether Jain had any connection with these entities, or had just appropriated their names for his scam. *theguardian.com, 23 Jul 2025.*

FLUFFY! FLUFFY!

Donna and Thomas Dobko successfully sued the Muse & Merchant furniture store in Coquitlam, British Columbia, because they claimed the salesperson had not made it clear that the cushions on a sofa they had bought were stuffed with feathers. The Dobkos complained that the cushions kept deflating after being sat on for an hour or two, and that they were “not prepared to continually fluff the cushions”. After reviewing the evidence, the court decided in the Dobkos’ favour and awarded them C$500 (£267) damages. *ctvnews.ca, 4 Jul 2025.*

MONKEY BUSINESS

Macaques living in a picturesque cliffside temple in Bali, Indonesia, have taken to swooping on unsuspecting visitors to grab phones, glasses, wallets and other valuables, then skipping off, hanging onto the items until they are bribed with food to return them. The monkeys have learned to tell the difference between valuable items, like phones and wallets, and lesser swag like flip-flops and hairclips, and barter accordingly. Researchers investigating the macaques say they have “unprecedented economic decision-making processes”; they will surrender some things for fruit, but for high-value items, they usually need to be bribed with their favourite delicacy – raw chicken eggs. One victim said, “I was taken aback – It’s like a criminal enterprise of monkeys.” *wsj.com, 30 Jul 2025.*

SIDELINES...

FAKE IT TILL YOU MAKE IT

In China, youth unemployment is currently running at nearly 14 per cent. However, seeing this as an opportunity, a 30-year-old entrepreneur who uses the pseudonym 'Feiyu' set up the Pretend To Work Company where young people can pay 30 yuan (£3.10) per day to go into a mock-up office and spend office hours searching for jobs or trying to create start-ups. He now has branches across China equipped with computers, Internet access, meeting spaces and tea rooms. User Shui Zhou, 30, says "I feel very happy – it's like we're working together as a group." Feiyu says: "What I'm selling isn't a workstation, but the dignity of not being a useless person." *BBC News, 11 Aug 2025.*

PISSED OFF

Angry that they hadn't given him a job interview, John Connaughton, 51, from St Petersburg, Florida, turned up at the premises of Doors, Moulding & More carrying several bottles of urine and started throwing them into the building, splashing employees and stock and causing $1,000 of damage. Confronted by angry staff, he brandished a skateboard at them, then fled, but was swiftly apprehended and charged with battery, criminal mischief and aggravated assault. *nbcmiami.com, 7 Apr 2025.*

HOT DOGGING

Chaos reigned on the Interstate 23 highway in Pennsylvania after a lorry scraped a car and shed its load of hot dogs, closing the road for several hours. Four people required treatment for minor injuries after the incident, but a major cleanup was required to clear the road of the sausagey delicacies, prompting local fire chief Brad Dauberman to say: "I can tell you personally, hot dogs are very slippery... I did not know that." *BBC News, 2 Aug 2025.*

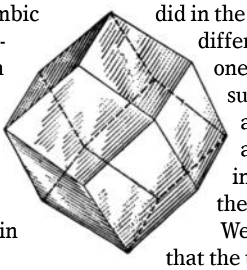
MARTIN ROSS

THE GARNET CODE

Do rhombic dodecahedrons hold the key to Britain's sacred geometry?

Heritage consultants James Wenn and James Syrett believe they have made an important discovery relating to the sacred geometry of buildings in Britain, recovering knowledge they claim was lost more than a century ago on the battlefields of World War I. They say their "lightbulb moment came in 2019 when they were looking at a garnet crystal and pondering why the Anglo Saxons were so fond of using them in jewellery.

The crystals take the geometric form of a rhombic dodecahedron, which Wenn describes as "like a cube covered in pyramids", and when he saw one, he suddenly made a connection with a type of Anglo Saxon church tower known as a Rhenish helm roof, which is exactly the same shape as half a rhombic dodecahedron. It had long been thought that the shape was used because it was ornamental, but Wenn and Syrett now think it was chosen as a symbol of harmony because rhombic dodecahedra can fit together with no gaps. In addition, the rhombic dodecahedron, with its 12 diamond-shaped sides, fits the description of the shape of the Universe in the writings of Plato.

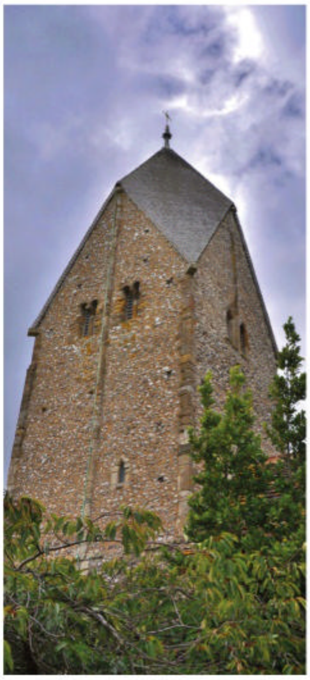


Once they started looking, Wenn and Syrett began finding significant rhombic dodecahedra everywhere; they turn up in the Houses of Parliament and the Old Bailey, in several Oxford and Cambridge colleges, and in many country houses. In Westminster Abbey, the Cosmati Pavement (see **FT277:44-48**), where every monarch has sat to be crowned for 700 years, contains a huge diagonal square. Wenn and Syrett interpret this as a cross section through a rhombic dodecahedron, and believe its purpose is to place the new monarch at the centre of an imaginary 3D version of the shape to ensure they become harmonious rulers.

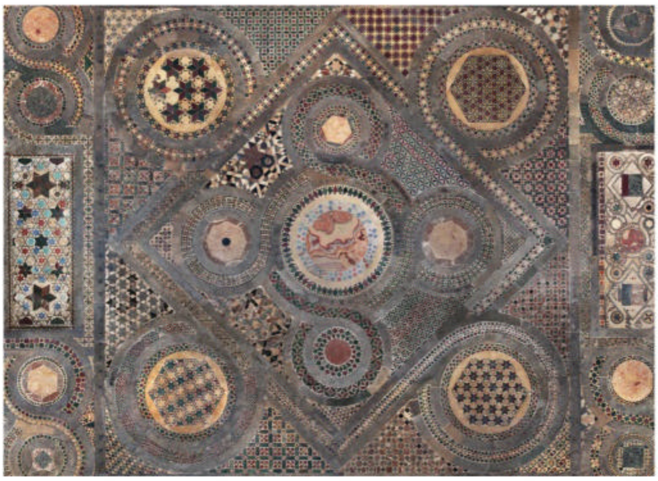
The pair communicated this finding to representatives of the royal family before King Charles's coronation, and believe their information influenced the ceremony: "What they did in the coronation that was different to the previous one is that they made sure that the screen around the King was a perfect cube sitting inside of the square of the pavement."

Wenn and Syrett found that the use of rhombic dodecahedra in architecture died out after WWI, because, Syrett says, "Aristocrats, who were the people who were the guardians of this knowledge, were sent to fight and die in the trenches in a way that hadn't really happened before," while the artistic movements that came after "wanted a clean slate and to start afresh on everything... We say it's the combination of those two things that did for it." The pair are optimistic about the implications of their discovery, saying, "We can now say we're as sophisticated a culture as Ancient Rome, Aztec America, Ancient Egypt. We believe this is going to be massive for tourism and people are going to want to come to Britain and discover this stuff which was previously forgotten".

Professor Marcus du Sautoy, an Oxford University mathematician, is enthusiastic about Wenn and Syrett's work, describing it as "an intellectual version of the metal detectorists uncovering a treasure trove of wonders." Wenn and Syrett are now investigating the common motif of the eight-pointed star, and Wenn says, "People in the past do have esoteric religious, ethnic, cultural, identities and activities... and for many hundreds of years they were definitely passionately interested in this rabbit hole of things," adding, "And so it's that rabbit hole we're charting for a modern public who's lost touch with it." *the-gazette.co.uk, 31 Dec 2025.*



ROB_SG / FLICKR / CREATIVE COMMONS

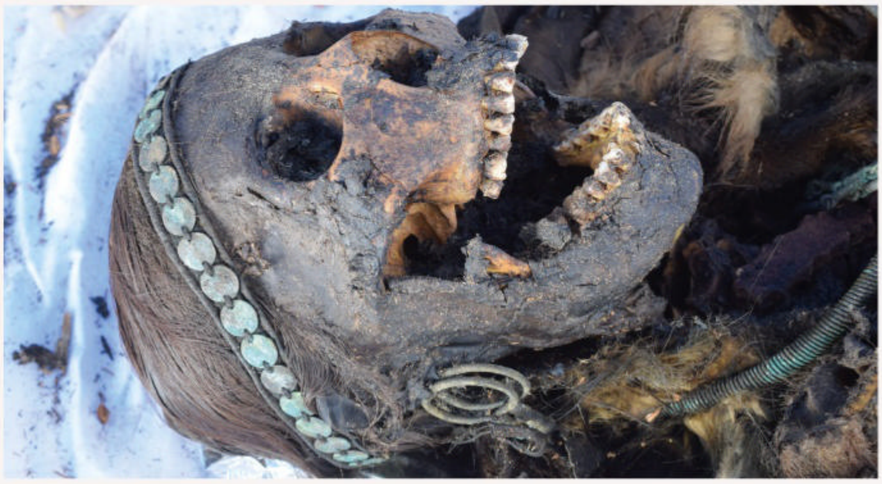


TOP: The Rhenish helm tower roof of Church of St Mary the Blessed Virgin in Sompting, Essex. **ABOVE**: The Cosmati Pavement, Westminster Abbey.

ARCHÆOLOGY

A MONTHLY EXCAVATION OF ODDITIES AND ANTIQUITIES

PAUL DEVEREUX brings news of ancient incest and a solution to the Stonehenge bluestone debate



PATRICE GÉRARD / CNRS

PAUL DEVEREUX

ABOVE LEFT: The mummified remains of ‘UsSergue1’, an 18th-century female shaman discovered in Yakutia. **ABOVE RIGHT**: Three of the remaining Stonehenge bluestones.

LAST OF HER KIND

After a decade and a half of excavations, archæologists have uncovered the naturally mummified remains of well over 100 indigenous Yakuts of north-eastern Siberia, one of the coldest places on Earth. The Yakuts strongly resisted Christianisation and Russian conquest and managed to maintain their traditional culture.

The bodies date back to between the 14th and 19th centuries. Among the remains were those of an 18th century female shaman the researchers have named ‘UsSergue1’, relating to where she was found. Nowadays, we tend to use the term ‘shaman’ generally to describe any tribal healer and intermediary with the spirit world using trance and ritual, but it initially came from the Manchu-Tungus (roughly, Siberian) word *šaman*, formed from the verb *ša* – ‘to know’. The researchers conducted DNA analysis of the mummified remains and found that in UsSergue1’s case she was the last shaman in the group they were studying. She was in her early 30s when she died, and was clad in a woollen red dress and typical Yakult shamanic regalia, and buried in a tree-trunk coffin. She was also a descendant of the most powerful Yakut clan. The study further revealed that her parents were “second-degree relatives” (such as half-siblings, uncle and niece or aunt and nephew). In short, she had resulted from the highest level of inbreeding found in the whole study. “We interpret UsSergue1 as an embodiment of her clan,” one of the study’s authors said, so preserving “their traditional and spiritual traditions.” She was considered to be the last shaman of her kind. *Nature, 7 Jan 2026. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-025-09856-5*

DADDY DEAREST

The matter of incest goes back much further than the Yakuts. DNA study of 23 skeletons in the cave site of Grotta della Monaca in Calabria, Italy, used as a burial ground between 1780 and 380 BC, has revealed the first known case in the archæological record of first-degree incest – father-daughter. Archæologists had analysed the DNA of the people buried in the cave in order to understand the genetic background of the group, but they did not anticipate finding such “extreme parental consanguinity”. *LiveScience, 18 Dec 2025.*

HARD LABOUR

There has been a background debate rumbling on in archæology as to whether the bluestones and altar stone at Stonehenge were brought there by human effort (the belief of most archæologists) or naturally by being carried on retreating glaciers – the “glacial transport theory”. The argument has now seemingly been settled by new research.

It has long been known that the bluestones, the oldest and shortest standing stones at Stonehenge (less than half the original 80 are now left) came from the Preseli area of South Wales, a distance of about 140 miles (225 km), while the now recumbent six-ton Altar Stone in the central part of the monument originated hundreds of miles further away in Scotland. But the manner of their transport to the Wiltshire location of Stonehenge in both cases has been the bone of contention. In the new study, researchers used analysis of microscopic mineral grains from rivers around Stonehenge confirming that glaciers didn’t reach that far south in England during the last Ice Age (2.6 million to 11,700 years ago), thus dashing the glacial transport idea.

Exactly how the builders of Stonehenge transported the stones remains less clear; presumably by dragging over land and floating by rafts across rivers or estuaries en route using a phenomenal level of human muscle and determination. The major organisation involved and sheer drive and sense of religious importance involved beggars imagination. As the researchers write: “The monument’s most exotic stones did not arrive by chance but were instead deliberately selected and transported.” *Communications Earth & Environment, 7(1), 21 Jan 2026. https://doi.org/10.1038/s43247-025-03105*

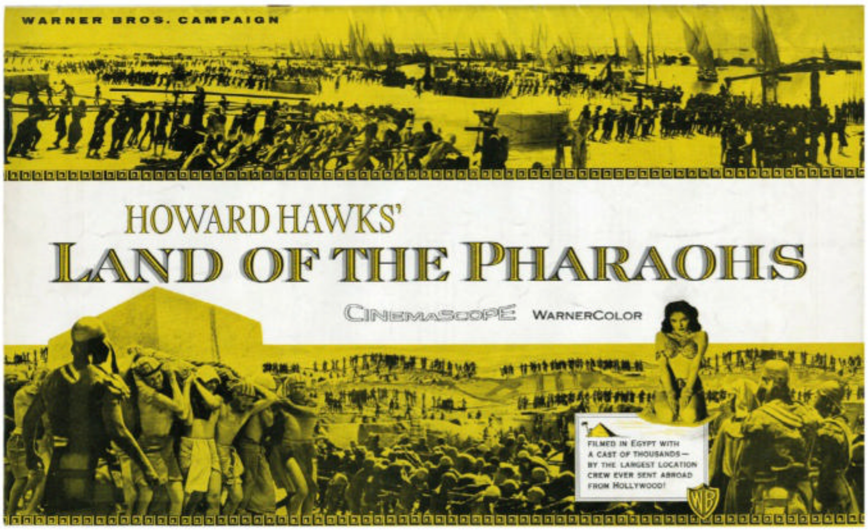
INSANITARY

It is amusing what obscure pieces of information modern archæological investigation can come up with. Bathing in Pompeii presents a case in point. Public baths were a way of life in ancient Rome, and at the peak of its empire it built long-distance aqueducts to feed the public baths with fresh water. But Pompeii’s earliest public baths (c.130-30 BC), prior to the building of an aqueduct, had their water supplied from wells and cisterns once a day by slaves. Researchers examined the chemistry of limescale deposited in the Republican Baths and adjoining pipes that showed “high contamination by human waste” hence indicating poor hygiene for the bathers. The matter was worsened because bathers scraped their bodies using olive oil rather than soap. Further, examination of element traces indicated that there had also been elevated levels of lead in the water. *PNAS, 12 Jan 2026: https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2517276122*

CLASSICAL CORNER

FORTEANA FROM THE ANCIENT WORLD COMPILED BY BARRY BALDWIN

320: SOME OF MY BEST FRIENDS ARE...


WARNER BROS. CAMPAIGN
HOWARD HAWKS'
LAND OF THE PHARAOHS
CINEMASCOPE
WARNERCOLOR
FILMED IN EGYPT WITH A CAST OF THOUSANDS— BY THE LARGEST LOCATION CREW EVER SENT ABROAD FROM HOLLYWOOD!
WB

ABOVE: Egyptian 'vanity' on an epic scale in Howard Hawks's 1955 film *Land of the Pharaohs*.

At the time of writing, immigrants were the Number One topic worldwide.

DISCLOSURE: I have been twice a migrant, once to Australia, thence to Canada where I have dual citizenship. What does all this make me?

An anonymous online statement acquits Fort of any xenophobic sentiments, contrasting him with Charles Dickens, and adducing his various travels as "seeming to have reinforced a broader world view."

According to Steinmeyer's biography (p.16), Fort's family could be traced back to the Dutch settler Jan Liberte in 1683.

A remote connection, but the Forts may (or may not) have suffered from the occasional manifestations of anti-Dutch feeling, documented on the Dutch Pasts and American Archive website.

The Dutch were often mocked as 'Cheeseheads' ('Kaaskops'). So are the people of the dairy state of Wisconsin, especially those who support the Green Bay Packers football team.

The Greeks famously scorned all other races as 'Barbarians'. This was a linguistic slur, suggesting that their languages sounded like people going 'Ba Ba'. With the honourable exception of Herodotus, racialist taunts were especially aimed at the Persians and other Orientals. For easy example, the word 'Pyramid' comes from a mocking description of the famous Egyptian edifices as looking like honey-cakes, an attitude later manifest in the Roman military man and expert on aqueducts Frontinus, who wrote them off as 'futile and vain'.

'Vain' of course is justified if we take the Great Pyramid as designed by pharaoh Cheops as his tomb for all eternity, an egotism emphasised in the 1955 film *Land of the Pharaohs* (1955, Jack Hawkins as Cheops).

Herodotus's enlightened attitude may have been helped by the fact that he came from Halicarnassus (modern Bodrum in Turkey, now a popular tourist destination), far from the hot-house atmosphere of Athens and the other city-states.

You have, though, to be careful with Herodotus. Discussing the Ethiopians ('Blameless' in Homer), he claims their constituent races ejaculated black semen. Is this a racialist slur? Tristan Samuels in *Journal of Black Studies* 46 (2015), 723-41, is convinced it is. Christopher Case's thesis 'The People with Burned Faces: Græco-Roman anti-black racism and its modern effects' (online) is equally sure. For the opposite view, see Maya Aziz, 'Skin Colour in Ancient Greece: The Insertion of a Non-Existent Prejudice into Antiquity', *Leeds African Studies Bulletin* 83 (2022), unpaginated, and more tellingly Frank Snowden (a black American Classicist) in his two books: *Blacks in Antiquity* (1970) and *Before Color: The Ancient View of Blacks* (1983).

We can throw in here a line from Virgil's *Second Eclogue* (on homosexual passion): "What do I care if Amyntas is dark?"

It would be amusing to speculate how Herodotus knew about black semen. Autopsy? Various medical websites do confirm that semen can be very dark because of diet or internal problems. This may be too much information, but whenever I eat beetroots, my pee is bright red for 24 hours.

However, the way Herodotus reports makes it clear that he was told this by his dragomen (guides), about whose claims in Egypt he was frequently sceptical.

Until the Hellenistic period, Greeks were not much aware of the Jews. Aristophanes is a predictably good guide to various targets of racialist jokes. Persians, of course, were the ultimate 'barbarians'. There are also frequent jokes on the Thracians (roughly = Bulgarians) for their red hair and snub noses, also on the semi-Russian Scythians for their ferocity. Which may make it odd that the Athenians used them and their archery skills as rudimentary policemen, chiefly to dragoon reluctant citizens into attending meetings of the People's Assembly.

The Romans had a field day with Jewish jokes – best account overall is *Racial Prejudice in Imperial Rome* by AN Sherwin-White (1967). Cicero (*On the Consular Provinces*, ch5 para10) calls them (and Syrians) "a race fit to be slaves", whilst Plutarch (*Life of Cicero*, ch7) attributes to him the question "What has a Jew got to do with a pig?"

His speech defending Flaccus complains about undue Jewish influence on public and economic life – now, where have we heard that before?

Horace gibes about farting in the faces of the circumcised Jews, and has a stock character, 'Apella the Jew', to denote foolish credulity – cf. our 'Tell it to the Marines'.

Juvenal in his Third *Satire* trots out a panorama of prejudices (Peter Green's Penguin translation is the best). There is no talk about colour. On parade are Jews, Greeks, and Syrians. Samuel Johnson in his famous poem *London* (1731) substitutes the French for Greeks – when in that country he insisted on speaking Latin, and with regard to dictionary-making calculated that three Englishmen equalled 1600 French.

For a detailed analysis, see Gilbert Highet, *Juvenal the Satirist* (1954), plus for the opposite view the weirdly amusing attack on all his works by Tom Geue, 'Sincerely Yours: Highet, Juvenal, I' (online).

The Jews are first up. Juvenal excoriates them for ruining Rome's green belt with their portable cookers (earliest barbecues?) and stinking food.

Since Domitian launched a persecution of Jews (Suetonius's *Life*, ch12), Juvenal might be thought to be trying to curry imperial favour? Suetonius recalls seeing a man forcibly stripped to see if he was circumcised. There had been a massive influx of Jews to Rome after the suppression of their revolt (AD 66-73, culminating in Masada) – cf. many British reactions to Jamaicans on *Windrush* and the Ugandan Indians expelled by Idi Amin. One notable individual was the historian Josephus. Another was Tiberius Julius Alexander who rose to the highest military and civilian offices, being often described as the most powerful Jew in Roman history. Juvenal recommends that you not only piss, but shit on his statues (his Latin here is very crude)

Footnote: If (sometimes a big IF) we may believe Josephus (*Jewish Antiquities*, bk20 ch 195), Nero's ferocious empress-wife. Poppæa Sabina, was an ardent admirer of Jewish religion and social practices, this possibly helping to divert Nero from scapegoating them for the Fire of Rome (AD 64), consequently blaming the then hated Christians.

There are multiple websites on this, e.g. a piece by Karl Maugham (2015) on the Fire connection. For a more cautionary view, see E Mary Smallwood, 'The Alleged Jewish Tendencies of Poppæa Sabina,' *The Journal of Theological Studies* 10 (1959), 329-38.

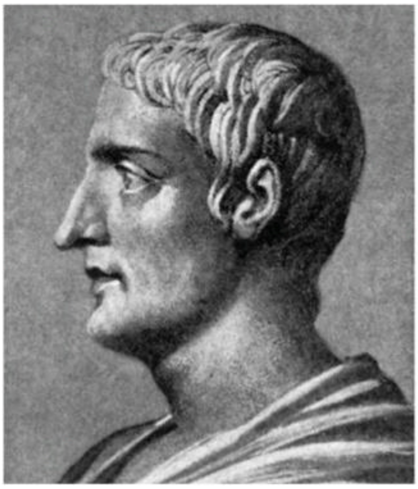
The Greeks then take centre stage in much more detail, mixed in with Syrians who get a few lines lamenting how pervasive their native girls and music have become in Rome. "I Can't Stand a Rome full of Greeks" is the poet's conclusion, after relentlessly castigating them for venality. They will take any job, if it pays, willing to fly to heaven if needs be. Juvenal's job centre listings are instructive: language teacher, orator, painter, geometry expert, trainer, augur, doctor, magician, rope dancer. Such, he roars, are the professions of the *Græculi* (Little Greeks). Here one recalls, in a quite different context, Fort's "thrice-accursed Greeks'.

Tacitus in his two monographs *Agricola* and *Germania* dissects Britons and Teutons. His approach is generally even-handed. After remarking "We must remember that we are dealing with Barbarians," he compares Britons with Gauls and others in appearance and behaviour, also praising their military courage and discipline.

Nothing very deleterious here. But in chapter 21, describing how they embraced Roman ways and keenly learned Latin, Tacitus rounds on them with the accusation that they were thus embracing slavery. Modern commentators continue to be baffled by Tacitus's attitude to Romanisation.

He also has much to say about British topography, with the clinching verdict that "its weather is miserable with a lot of rain and mist" – no climate change here…

Catullus (Poem 11 v12) refers to the Britons as "most remote and dreadful",



LEFT: Tacitus, whose *Agricola* and *Germania* offered observations on the Britons and Teutons: "We must remember we are dealing with barbarans." **BELOW**: Hitler's drawing of a trumphal arch, part of his plan for a remodelled Berlin, to be renamed Germania.

> *He derides the Germans' beer and seems to approve of their drowning homosexuals in mud*

a sentiment often taken to refer to their xenophobia – perhaps they had a woad-painted Nigel Farage in their ranks?

Many visitors might say nothing much has changed….

The main purpose of the *Agricola* was to exalt Tacitus's father-in-law's military successes. By contrast, the other monograph devotes most space to German characteristics. Can only offer a compressed version here – read it for yourselves in the Penguin or other translations. In chapter 33, Tacitus pays Germans the ultimate compliment: should their tribes ever unite, Goodbye Roman Empire.

He praises their physical type and military prowess and valour, talks at length about their willingness to be ruled by women (giving specific examples), derides their beer, and seems to approve of their drowning homosexuals in mud.

Tacitus is basically introducing notions of 'The Noble Savage', famously promoted by Rousseau and echoed in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* via John the Savage's character.

The Nazis, especially Himmler, were obsessed with the *Germania* as Roman endorsement of the 'Aryan Superman', though of their leaders only Heidrich looked in the least like one. Hitler planned to rename Berlin 'Germania' as Capital of the Reich. Italian classicist Arnaldo Momigliano called it "The most dangerous book ever written". An exaggeration, but understandable in a Jewish historian forced to flee from Mussolini.

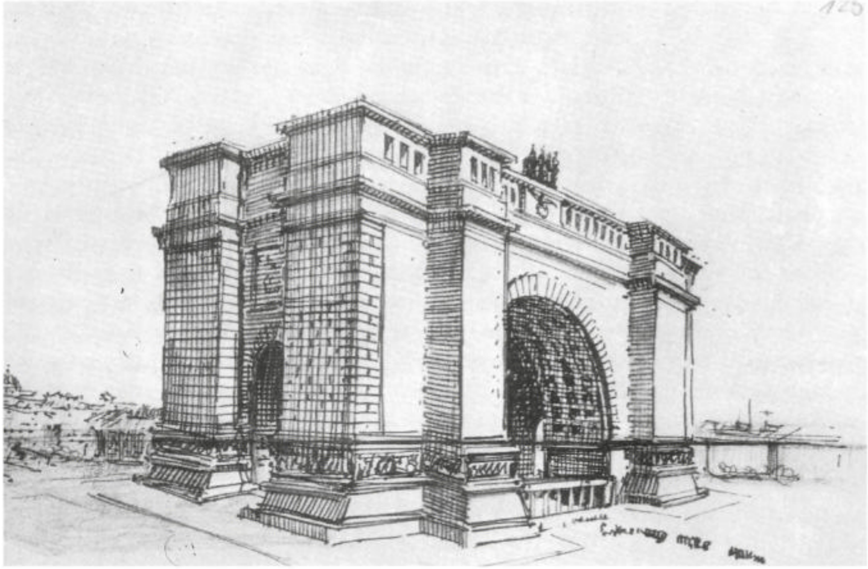
The Byzantines were always ready to make disobliging remarks about any of their enemies: Arabs, Avars, Bulgars, Islamists, Persians, Turks – you name them….

For easy example, the ninth-century princess Cassia, when not writing hymns about Christian exemplars, composed an epigram about the Armenians, beginning "The foulest of races" and continuing in the same vein.

Particular venom was largely reserved for the Jews, accused of procuring the Crucifixion of Jesus – Jewish mob fury was certainly whipped up, but it was of course the Roman governor Pontius Pilate who signed the death warrant.

The Theodosian Code (4th century AD), amplified by Justinian (527-565) denied political office to Jews and stripped away their civil rights, also imposing forced conversions. After which, Jews always suffered, from Shakespeare, Stalin and Hitler and everywhere else, and still do.

For full discussions of this odious topic, see Stephen Bowman in *The Cambridge Companion to AntiSemitism* (2022, chapter seven) and Martin Winkler in *New German Critique* 127 (2016), 91-118. Also, A Andréades, 'The Jews in the Byzantine Empire,' *Economic History* 3 (1934), 1-23.



Electric air

DAVID HAMBLING records rare encounters with the awesome phenomenon of St Elmo's Fire

"I flamed amazement: sometime I'll divide,
And burn in many places; on the topmast,
The yards and bowsprit, would I flame distinctly,
Then meet and join."

So the spirit Ariel describes how he appeared on a ship in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1610), driving the sailors overboard in terror. Educated audiences would have nodded in recognition at the eerie St Elmo's Fire, a phenomenon already well-known to sailors.

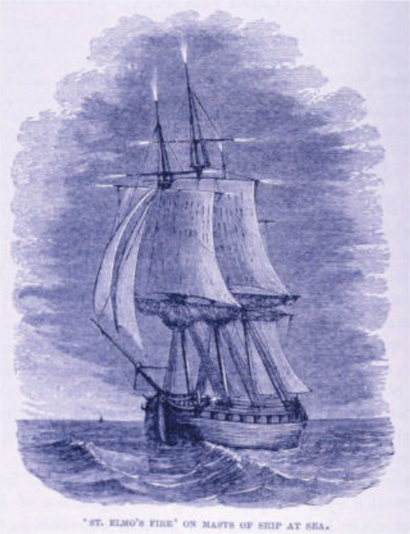
The effect typically appears towards the end of a storm and manifests as a steady blue glow or sparkling lights at the tip of the mast or on yardarms. It is named for St Erasmus, a third century Bishop of Formia in Italy. Stories relate that Erasmus continued preaching after a thunderbolt struck the ground close to him (a bold move). Sailors, whose ships were prone to lightning strikes, adopted him as their patron.

Contrary to Shakespeare though, sailors saw St Elmo's Fire as a good omen and a sign of saintly protection. Inland, where it is less well known, it can cause alarm.

In 1882 James Moir wrote in *Nature* magazine that, after a nearby stroke of lightning, *"I found myself enveloped in a sheet of pale flickering white light... Though I turned about pretty smartly, and shifted my position, I found it impossible to shake off the flickering flames. When I walked on they continued with me for two or three minutes."*

A respondent recalls a similar incident involving a Mr John Stewart and his companion walking in Rannoch who were *"all at once set on flames by some mysterious fire... and the more they tried to rub the flames off the more tenaciously they seemed to adhere, and the more the fire increased in brightness and magnitude."* They remained unharmed.

It was not clear whether the phenomenon was chemical, like marsh lights (see **FT370:14**), or electrical. In 1893 *Nature* reported that St Elmos's Fire was "not uncommon" on Ben Nevis in winter months. Cyclonic storms were known at the meteorological observatory as 'St Elmo's weather". When the mountain top was clear of cloud an electric current ran up the telegraph cable to the observatory, and when it was enveloped in cloud again the current reversed.



'ST. ELMO'S FIRE' ON MASTS OF SHIP AT SEA.

The effect typically manifests as a steady blue glow at the tip of the mast or on yardarms

As with lightning, St Elmo's Fire is the result of powerful electrostatic fields building up in the atmosphere (see **FT464:14**) mainly due to friction between lighter, positively charged ice crystals, which rise, and heavier, negatively charged 'graupel' (soft hail), which falls, separating the charge. Clouds may be charged to hundreds of millions of volts of potential. This can be enough to cause the air to break down into luminous plasma which collects on pointed objects.

In 1929, the *Bulletin of the American Meteorological Society* reported an aircraft was dispatched to observe Pike's Peak in Colorado because of lights which were thought to be lost travellers, but which turned out to be St Elmo's Fire.

Aircraft often give dramatic close-up displays, like one reported in 1945: *"A blue corona-like discharge was visible around the periphery of the airscrews. Soon as the aircraft was in the cloud... the corona discharge turned into a brush discharge, pointing forward, from all the protruding portions of the aircraft... changing from a scarcely visible bluish ring around the airscrews to a brilliant display from every portion of the aircraft projecting forward and reaching a length of a foot or more."*

So the best place to see St Elmo's Fire is an airliner, but it is rare and there are few good photographs. One estimate suggests a pilot encounters visible displays every two years on average, about as often as they see the Northern Lights. The fire is harmless, but indicates there are large, potentially hazardous static charges present.

Because of the high voltages involved the effect cannot be easily reproduced in the laboratory and St Elmo's Fire must be studied in the wild. Sometimes researchers get lucky. On 26 February 1995, an instrumented NASA aircraft looking for red sprites and blue jets in Peru instead ran into a storm, and St Elmo's Fire covered the wings and nose. The researchers recorded the event on a low light level TV spectrograph. This confirmed that the emissions were consistent with low-energy electrons interacting with molecular nitrogen in the atmosphere,

As a weird and rare atmospheric light phenomenon, St Elmo's Fire may be related to ball lightning, but there are no good theories at present.

Naturally, there is also speculation that it is related to UFO/UAP reports. In 1978, unconventional entomologist Prof PS Calahan of the University of Florida carried out experiments exposing insects to high electric fields. He found that different insects glowed in a variety of colours. Calahan theorised that a series of UFO sightings in the Uintah Basin in Utah between 1965 and 1968 were partially due to swarms of spruce budworms, lit up by St Elmos's Fire from the electric fields of thunderclouds overhead. He suggested that UFO sightings might provide insights into nocturnal insect flight patterns.

(As a footnote, in the 80's bratpack movie of the same name, the phenomenon – which an uninformed character claims is a mythical light which guided sailors – is a metaphor for moments of clarity during the transition from teen to adult.)

St Elmo's Fire has travelled the road from being an unexplained phenomenon in Shakespeare's time, associated with saints and fairies, to acceptance as scientific fact, but it is still elusive.

Like the Northern lights, a thunderstorm or even a rainbow, an encounter with St Elmo's Fire can fill observers with awe and wonder. And to those not familiar with the science, it may still also be a thing of supernatural terror.

PRICING IN DISCLOSURE

Should the Bank of England be planning for an alien-triggered financial crisis? Plus, UFO files released...

ETIENNE GILFILLAN / ADOBE STOCK

LEFT: Could the disclosure of the existence of alien life by the US Government trigger a full-blown financial crisis? **BELOW**: Financial security analyst Helen McCaw thinks so, and has written to the Governor of the Bank of England with her concerns.

BANKING ON ALIENS

Helen McCaw, formerly a senior financial security analyst at the Bank of England, has written to the Bank's current governor, Andrew Bailey, to urge him to plan for the financial crisis she believes would be triggered if the US Government discloses the existence of alien life.

She is reported to have said "The United States government appears to be partway through a multi-year process to declassify and disclose information on the existence of a technologically advanced non-human intelligence responsible for Unidentified Anomalous Phenomena (UAPs)," and explained that "UAP disclosure is likely to induce ontological shock and provoke psychological responses with material consequences... There might be extreme price volatility in financial markets due to catastrophising or euphoria, and a collapse in confidence if market participants feel uncertain on how to price assets using any of the familiar methods." McCaw believes such circumstances might lead to a rush to buy "safe" assets such as gold or government bonds, but also suggests that the opposite might happen due to the perception that new technologies resulting from alien contact could increase the supply of precious metals.

"There might be extreme volatility in markets due to catastrophising"

It seems that McCaw's concerns are not the result of any specific inside knowledge of US plans, but are a deduction based on the recent congressional UAP hearings, US whistleblower testimonies and the current "Disclosure" circus. *independent.co.uk, 18 Jan 2026.*

GOVERNMENTS WANT UFOS

After the fall of the Soviet Union, the US Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) found evidence of a massive Russian programme to collect UFO reports from across the military, and a DIA document recently obtained by UFO journalist George Knapp suggests that they also had another programme known as Thread 3 that collated knowledge obtained from such reports, as well as from UFO news in Western countries. This allegedly shows that Soviet interest in the topic dates back to the days of Stalin, who, it is claimed, ordered investigations into UFOs after the Roswell incident and what are reported to be similar incidents in the USSR. The document also contains reports of incidents where mysterious objects had effects on both people and military equipment, including sensor systems, missiles, and planes, and claims that early cosmonauts reported UFO encounters in space. The ultimate aim of the programme, the document says, was to use UFO "features" for military purposes, although there is no evidence that the Soviets succeeded in doing this.

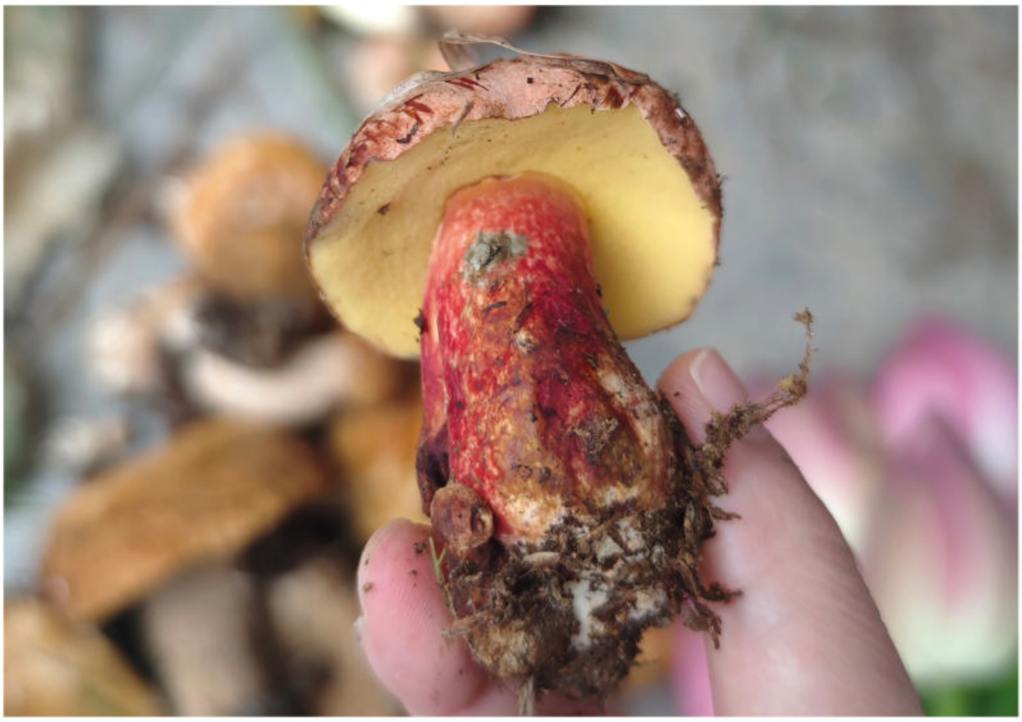
Meanwhile, a routine release of British government documents to the National Archives in Kew has revealed that in the 1990s, following a massive UFO flap over Belgium in 1989/90 with multiple sightings of giant black triangles, the UK's Defence Intelligence Staff was ordered to investigate "unidentified aerial phenomena".

This investigation continued for some years, with an internal memo from 1997 reading, "Logic would indicate that if significant numbers are reporting seeing strange objects in the sky then there may be a basis in fact. It could be argued that UAPs pose a potential threat to the defence of the realm since we have no idea what they are!" A further document, again referring to the black triangles over Belgium, says "UAPs do not appear to use conventional reaction propulsion. The Belgian deltas (confirmed by the country's MoD) hovered for long periods and accelerated quickly to supersonic speeds, outrunning F-16s. If this represents real technology perhaps it should be acquired."

The document also acknowledges that the reality of the Rendlesham Forest encounter of 1980 was "confirmed by the US unit commander and others" and continues, "Some reports described objects in terms of manœuvre, speed and shape which lie beyond our engineering knowledge and that which could be reasonably expected from hostile powers. There is considerable difficulty, therefore, in assessing and prioritising these reports sufficiently quickly to provide, where warranted, an active response... Any future concerns, terrestrial or extraterrestrial, are likely to require national or international coordination, responsive only within security alliances." *8newsnow.com, 16 Jan 2026; nypost.com, 4 Jan 2026.*

WEIRD PLANTS, FREAKY FUNGI

Botanical bizarrerie and some mycological surprises in the news



COLIN DOMNAUER

LEFT: The recently named *Lanmaoa asiatica* mushroom, which if consumed uncooked produces hallucinations of "little people". **BELOW**: Technicians measure radiation readings on the control room panels of Reactor No 4 of the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant, where an unusual black mould seems to thrive.

"FAIRY" FUNGUS

A fungus only given a scientific name in 2014 has proved fascinating to both mycologists and psychedelics researchers alike. Eaten raw, *Lanmaoa asiatica* triggers vivid hallucinations, but, unlike almost all other hallucinogenic mushrooms, it does not belong to the *Psilocybe* genus, nor does it produce the hallucinogen psilocybin. *Lanmaoa,* though, has long been known in China. It is found in Yunnan and regularly sold in markets there, where it is called *xiao ren ren* which means "little people mushroom". Cooking destroys the hallucinogens in the mushroom, and *xiao ren ren* is a local delicacy, but 96 per cent of people hospitalised in Yunnan with *xiao ren ren* poisoning, caused by undercooking the mushroom, report seeing visions of "little people".

According to mycologist Colin Domnauer: "A prominent Daoist text from the 3rd century CE refers to a 'flesh spirit mushroom, if consumed raw, [it] allows one to 'see a little person' and 'attain transcendence immediately'." The fungus seems to have the same impact elsewhere too; in the Philippines, consumption of raw *Lanmaoa* is also associated with visions of "little people", and an early explorer of Papua reported being told by a local elder that when he had eaten the mushroom the little people had teased him and he had tried to chase them away. This is unusual for a hallucinogen; most produce visions that are dependent on the mental state of the experiencer and the context in which psychedelics are consumed. Scientists are still trying to isolate the hallucinogenic substance in *Lanmaoa,* but its ability to produce consistent experiences offers interesting research opportunities. *arichlife.com.au, 16 Dec 2025.*

> *The little people teased him and he had to chase them away*

THE BLACK FUNGUS OF CHERNOBYL

Since the Chernobyl disaster in 1986, the radiation in the 30km (19 mile) exclusion zone around the reactors has been found to have had a variety of unexpected effects on the organisms that remain there. One of the more extraordinary organisms is a black mould formed from a combination of fungi. Researcher Nelli Zhdanova found that these fungi actively grow towards the most radioactively contaminated parts of the zone, and that they have now colonised the interior of the still highly radioactive reactor at the heart of the disaster, with the mould draping itself across the ceiling and walls and spreading inside metal conduits that protect electrical cables. Given that the ionising radiation given off by contaminated areas is far more energetic than sunlight and is capable of utterly wrecking the proteins and DNA vital for life, this 'radiotropism' would normally be disastrous for any organism. Nonetheless, the fungi seem to thrive, in fact they grow 10 per cent faster in the presence of radioactive Cæsium than they do otherwise. The fungi have been found to be actively using the energy from radiation to power their growth, although researchers are still investigating how this mechanism works. The mould is black because the fungi are packed with the energy-absorbing pigment melanin, which reduces the radiation penetrating their mycelia to manageable levels. NASA is now considering

SIPA US / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

surrounding their astronauts in walls of the fungi for long-term space travel, as these would form a self-regenerating barrier between the humans and the dangerous cosmic radiation outside. The fungi could also be grown after lift-off, reducing the weight of a spacecraft at launch. *BBC News, 28 Nov 2025.*

RARE EARTH FERN

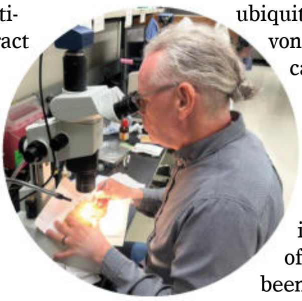
Rare earth elements (REE) are metals whose properties make them vital for everything from wind turbines and electric car batteries to smartphones and medical scanners. They, are, though, as their name suggests, rare, and only ever occur in low concentrations, so extracting them involves massive and environmentally damaging mining operations. Now, researchers in South China have discovered that the *Blechnum orientale* fern, which grows near rare earth metal mines, absorbs these metals and concentrates them, forming crystals of the REE-rich mineral monazite within its tissues, particularly in the cell walls and spaces between cells. This makes it theoretically possible to extract REE by growing *Blechnum orientale* in soils rich in rare elements, allowing them to accumulate the crystals, then refining the ferns to extract the metals, reducing the need for mining. *phys.org/news, 13 Nov 2025.*

TREE ASTRONOMERS

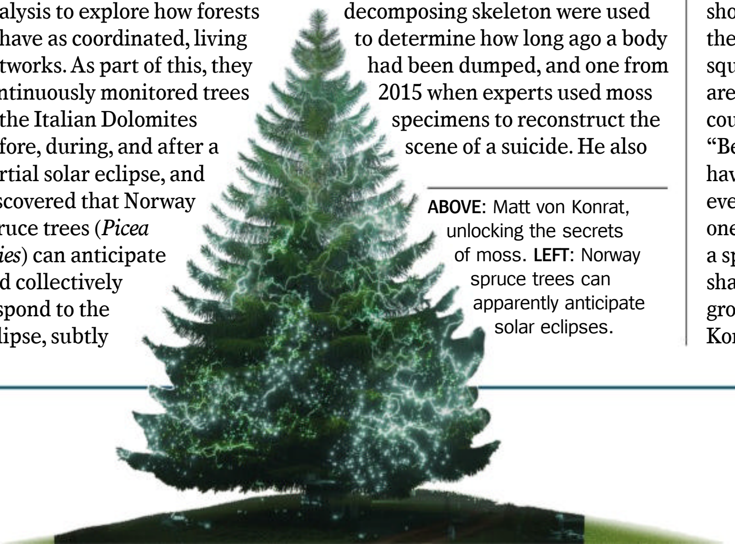
An international team of scientists has been collaborating on the pioneering "Cyberforest Experiment", combining tools from quantum field theory, complex systems science, and biological signal analysis to explore how forests behave as coordinated, living networks. As part of this, they continuously monitored trees in the Italian Dolomites before, during, and after a partial solar eclipse, and discovered that Norway spruce trees (*Picea abies*) can anticipate and collectively respond to the eclipse, subtly changing their electrical activity up to 14 hours before the event. The researchers used advanced mathematical tools derived from neuroscience and ecology to analyse the forest's electrical activity and this revealed that the trees changed from their usual irregular, multi-patterned electrical signals to a more stable and coordinated rhythm during the eclipse. This suggests there is a form of emergent organisation taking place within the forest. "Our results suggest that forests don't just function as collections of individual trees, but as interconnected biological networks capable of sophisticated coordination – a so called holobiont," said Alessandro Chiolerio, a visiting professor at the University of Western England, Bristol, who participated in the research. *uwe.ac.uk/news, 14 May 2025.*

MURDER MOSS FOUL

Moss is one of the oldest and most resilient organisms on earth, with over 12,000 species identified, most of which have the ability to grow in places plants cannot. This ubiquity led botanist Matt von Konrat from Chicago's Field Museum to consider their use as sources of evidence at crime scenes. "I thought, why don't we look into writing a review of how bryophytes have been used in forensics? So we reviewed 150 years of scientific literature to see how these plants have been used in investigations," said von Konrat. "Well, it turns out, the answer was, 'Not that much'." He could find only 11 cases where moss had been important in over 150 years. Among those he found was one in Australia, from 1929, when moss growth rates on a decomposing skeleton were used to determine how long ago a body had been dumped, and one from 2015 when experts used moss specimens to reconstruct the scene of a suicide. He also found a 2011 case where samples of moss on a murder suspect's shoes enabled police to pinpoint the victim's grave to about 50 square feet (4.6m^2) in a search area that encompassed seven counties in northern Michigan. "Because they're so small, they have all sorts of microhabitats – even if an area overall seems to be one sort of habitat, they can find a spot that works for them in the shade, or in the canopy, or even growing under the grasses," von Konrat says. He also points out that further clues may be found by looking at the even smaller organisms living on the mosses. "This means that mosses can be a valuable tool for forensic scientists looking to confirm details of where a crime took place." As a result of the publication of his review in the journal *Forensic Sciences Research*, von Konrat hopes more forensic pathologists and law enforcement officials will consider mosses as potential sources of evidence in the future. *popsci.com, 12 Nov 2025.*



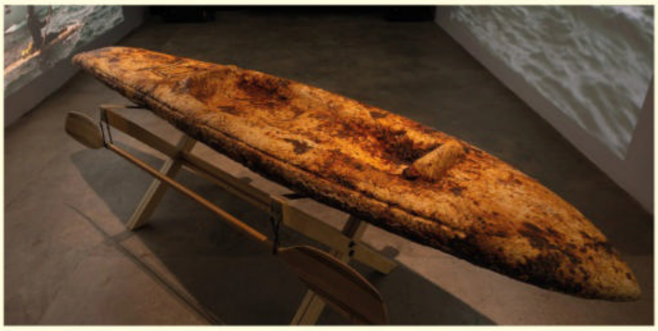
FIELD MUSEUM



ABOVE: Matt von Konrat, unlocking the secrets of moss. **LEFT**: Norway spruce trees can apparently anticipate solar eclipses.

MUSHROOM KAYAK

In August, kayaker, artist and mycologist Sam Shoemaker set off from Catalina Island in California and paddled 26.4 miles (42.5km) to San Pedro, just south of Los Angeles. While the journey was not particularly exceptional, his kayak was. Shoemaker had grown it rather than made it, cultivating a *Ganoderma polychromum* mycelium (a network of fungal fibres) on a hard hemp substrate packed inside a fiberglass mould to form the kayak. He then dried the resulting structure for several months using fans, resulting in a rough and durable product with a cork-like texture. Shoemaker's journey took 12 hours, with a fin whale shadowing him for part of it, and was the world's longest open-water journey in a kayak built from fungus. He had embarked on the journey to promote "AquaFung", a product of Open Fung, a nonprofit advancing the future of fungi-based technologies, materials, and art, who claim that AquaFung has many of the same properties as polystyrene (Styrofoam). Phil Ross from Open Fung says "People hate Styrofoam plastics in the water washing onto shore. [AquaFung] is biodegradable. It acts a lot like the material that everyone seems to hate." *theguardian.com, 7 Sept 2025.*



ABOVE: Sam Shoemaker and the kayak he created from fungus.

PHOTOS COURTESY SAM SHOEMAKER / FULCRUM ARTS

Pennies from Heaven

ALAN MURDIE examines cases of apporting coins and spooks flashing the cash

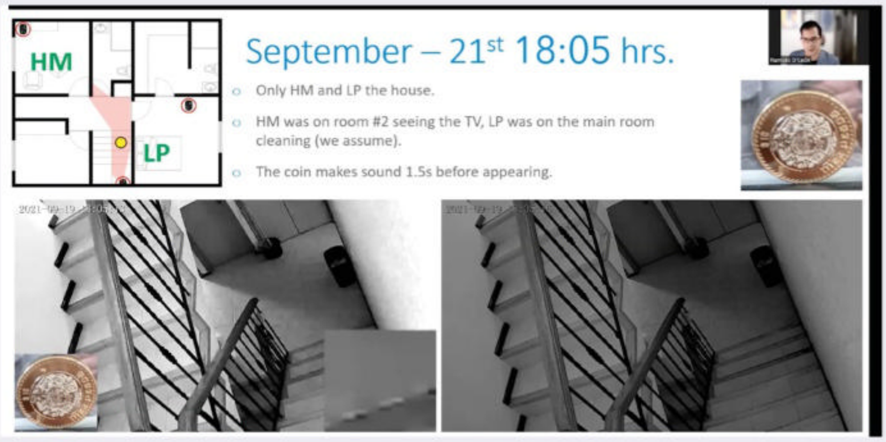
"Money isn't funny" is a comedy maxim. But can it ever be ghostly? For example, how about when money drops from thin air?

A ghost story about materialising cash sounds very odd, but it is what a trio of paranormal researchers in Mexico City confronted over 2021-2022 in the flat of an older married couple who believed they had been suffering the attentions of a ghost showering them with coins, flowers and other items at irregular intervals.

Now such materialisations – labelled 'apports', from the French *apporter* ('to bring') – and especially of money may sound a marvellous thing. Certainly of all fortean phenomena involving things falling from the air, this might be one worth experiencing. Downpours of ordinary stones are intrinsically worthless unless you are gravelling a driveway or building a rockery. With rains of fish you might conceivably feed people with them or sell them if you gathered sufficient quantities and were quick enough off the mark. Cloud-bursts of frogs provide more limited options, dependant on whether you live in a country whose palates extend to delicacies like *Cuisses de Grenouilles* (frogs' legs).

But the couple, a gentleman in his late 50s and his wife, aged 45, wanted rid of these strange deposits, seeing it as a Midas-like curse to be deluged with petty cash from a range of currencies. Mostly they received low-value Mexican coins, but also acquired two Indian rupees, two Czech crowns, one US cent, some Argentine and Colombian pesos and four euros, rather like stray castings from some celestial bureau de change or aerial piggy bank. By way of a change, a Pope Francis religious medal also appeared.

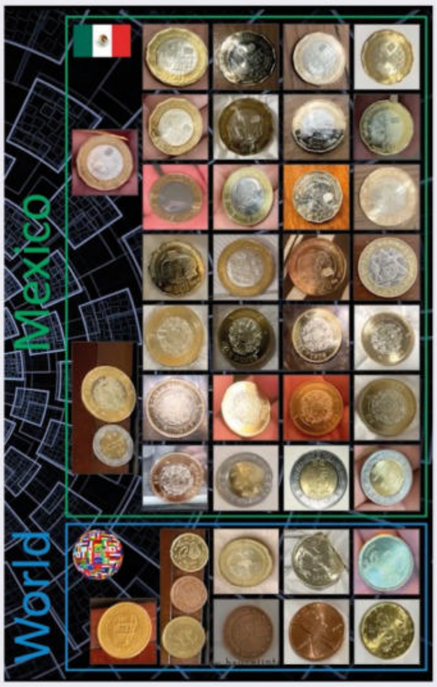
The couple embraced a complex set of spiritual beliefs, but reached out to parapsychologists for help, with their appeal reaching Ramsés D'León, a data scientist attached to Mexico University UTEL interested in psychokinesis. Together with two colleagues, Alfredo Silva and Alex A Alvarez of the Unidade Parapsychologica de Investigation Difusion and Ensenanza (UPIDE), a Mexican research and teaching organisation, he mounted an investigation. The trio represented that ideal but often elusive combination: academic scholars who also prove to be adept field investigators, successfully bringing a wide range of perspectives and methods to the case. Rather sceptical of spirits, D'León and his colleagues focused on establishing the sequence of events and obtaining instrumental corroboration. Of course, many mainstream academics studiously avoid ghostly visitants altogether; after all, if ghosts exist then the fixed ideological underpinnings of many social science paradigms are jeopardised. Fortunately, as with a growing number of exceptions found round the world, their thoughtful report, published in the *Journal of the Society for*



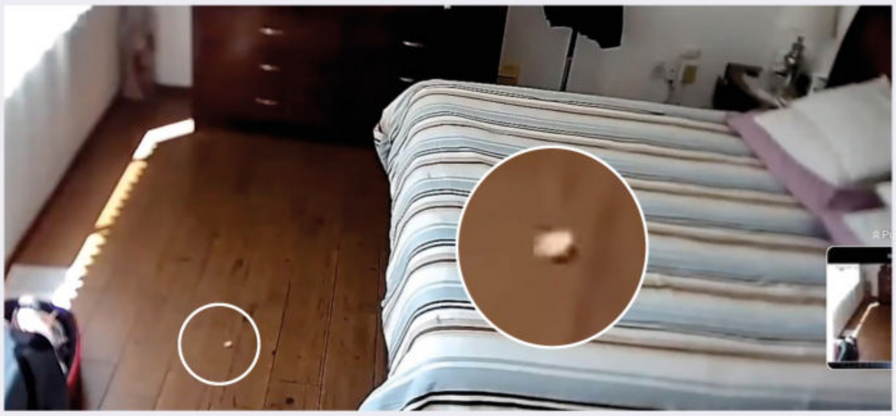
September – 21st 18:05 hrs.

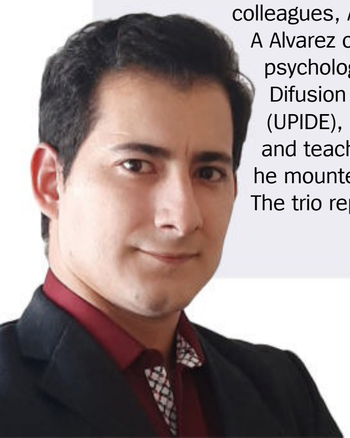
- Only HM and LP the house.
- HM was on room #2 seeing the TV, LP was on the main room cleaning (we assume).
- The coin makes sound 1.5s before appearing.

PHOTOS: RAMSÉS D'LEÓN ET AL



ABOVE AND BOTTOM: Video cameras captured apports of coins in various parts of a Mexican couple's house. **LEFT:** Most of the coins were Mexican currency, but Indian rupees, Czech crowns and US cents also appeared. **BOTTOM LEFT:** Ramsés D'León and his coleagues have mounted an investigation into the apports.



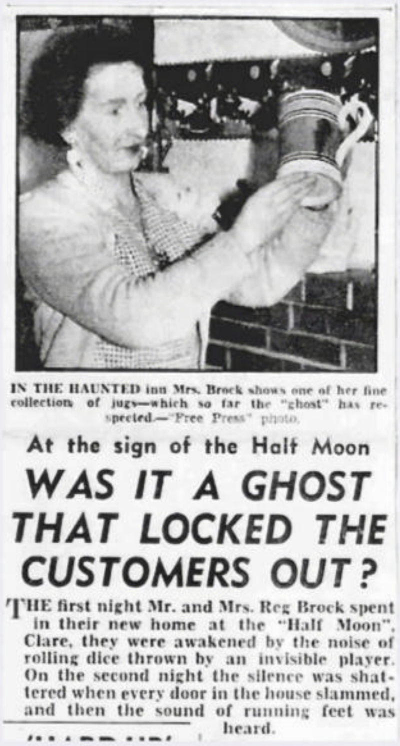


LEFT AND BELOW: In 1956, the Half Moon pub in Clare, Suffolk, was the scene of coin apports and other ghostly phenomena.

Psychical Research (October 2025), is in many ways exemplary, constituting one of more impressive field investigations of recent years and demonstrating what properly resourced investigators can achieve.

Setting up video cameras, the researchers monitored the Mexican couple's flat for a year. Over this extended period of observation their videos apparently captured traces of a number of actual coin materialisations – but, frustratingly, the camera was usually pointing in the wrong direction so they only caught the sound of the coins' arrival! Or their equipment broke down or was mysteriously disconnected, even when the flat was empty. Such 'shyness' of physical phenomena, it may be recalled, has long been the bane of researchers of phenomena ranging from poltergeists to psychic surgery. Inevitably, scepticism or suspicion revolves around the fact that coins (along with most apports) are usually and conveniently small enough to be concealed in clothing, enabling any prankster to produce one as if by a miracle when no one is looking. The heyday of such mediumistic apports occurred in Victorian and Edwardian seances, where the multilayered fashions worn by both sexes, the voluminous beards of men and the extravagant hairstyles of women supplied ample hiding places, sparking decades of unresolvable controversy and argument.

However, in two instances D'León and colleagues captured suggestive coin falls directly in camera shot which they were at a loss to explain. Perhaps significantly, their cameras also failed to detect any positive evidence of chicanery or fraud by the couple at any point. Satisfied that at least some of the phenomena were genuinely inexplicable – and it is hard not to be impressed by the thoroughness of their investigation – they pondered the possible meaning and symbolism of these events.



IN THE HAUNTED inn Mrs. Brock shows one of her fine collection of jugs—which so far the "ghost" has respected.—"Free Press" photo.

At the sign of the Half Moon

WAS IT A GHOST THAT LOCKED THE CUSTOMERS OUT?

THE first night Mr. and Mrs. Reg Brock spent in their new home at the "Half Moon", Clare, they were awakened by the noise of rolling dice thrown by an invisible player. On the second night the silence was shattered when every door in the house slammed, and then the sound of running feet was heard.

In Cardiff in 1988-89 a poltergeist lobbed stones and old pennies around a garage

('Investigating Coin-Based Apports: A Methodological Approach to Non-Mediumistic Recurrent Physical Anomalies', Ramsés D'León, Alfredo Silva and Alex A Alvarez in *Journal* of the SPR [2025] Vol 89, No 4, Oct 2025, pp.138-225).

Spontaneous falls of coins have been recorded before in cases spread over more than 70 years (and religious medals allegedly turned up at Borley Rectory years before). In 1956 the licensees of the Half Moon Pub at Clare, Suffolk, received a whole coin collection, later identified as property belonging to a former tenant who had disappeared 10 years earlier; ghost hunter Philip Paul, attending the pub, only got a sixpence. (Philip Paul personal communications, 2006-2008*; Suffolk Free Press* 4 Jan 1956; *Suffolk Free Press* 15 Aug 1956).

In July that same year a penny-tossing poltergeist tormented a Mr and Mrs J Pearcey and their 13-year-old son, driving them from a new council house in Esmond Road, Chiswick, after they and police officers were pelted. When spanners started flying, the Pearceys fled, telling *Psychic News* they were moving out to "give the house a chance to cool off". ('Flying Pennies Fill A House', *Daily Express,* 21 July 1956; 'The Penny and the Poltergeist', *Psychic News*, 28 July 1956).

Apports of coins and a £1 note occurred in the Enfield poltergeist outbreak, but so many things happened there that these hardly stand out. In Cardiff in 1988-1989 a poltergeist lobbed stones and old pennies around a garage (**FT381:21, 438:33-34**); some 16 years later, a tyre depot at Holmes Market, Doncaster, suffered identical manifestations between 2006 and 2007. When new owner Mr Nick White took over, the falls ceased, only to resume in Spring 2010 when two old pennies descended. (D. Fontana, 'A responsive poltergeist: A case from South Wales'. *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research, 1991,* 57(823), pp385-402; *Yorkshire Post*, 6 April 2010).

These cases were public events, but I

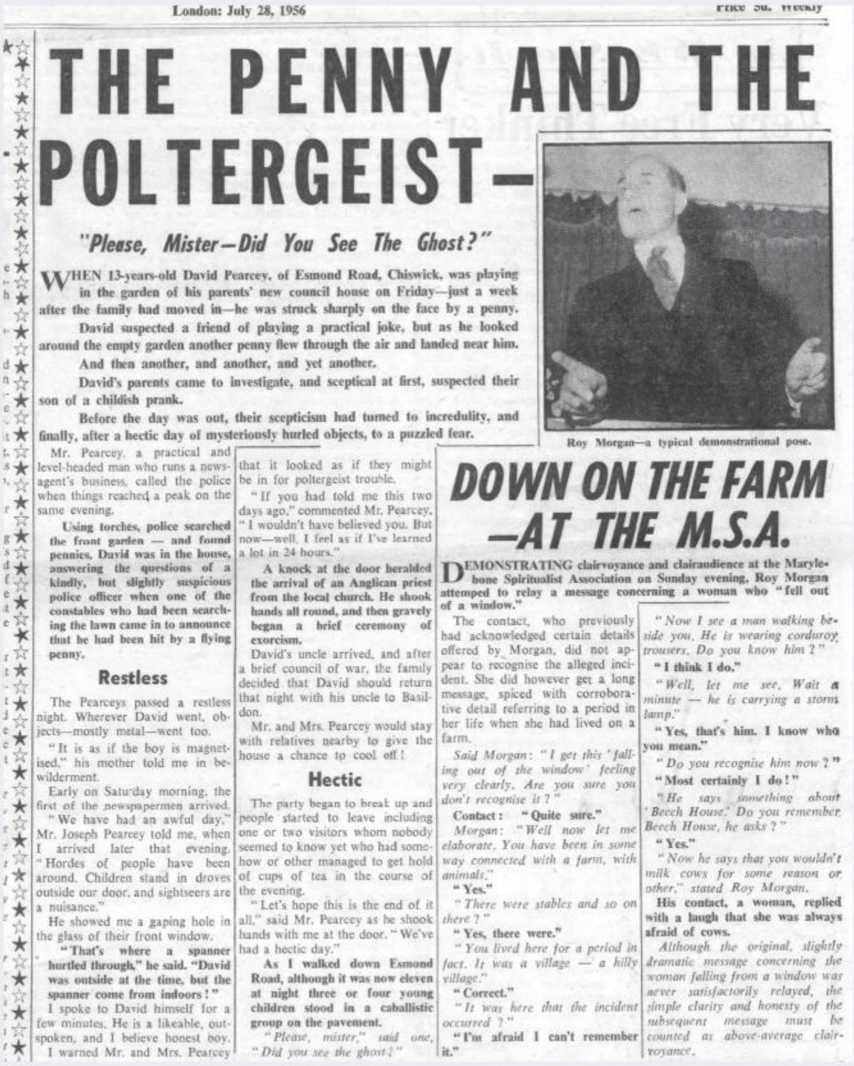
suspect many more occur privately, only becoming known because individuals have the courage to report them.

Take, for example, a Mr Arthur Cox who wrote to the Society for Psychical Research in 1993 about a mysterious coin drop he experienced whilst clearing out the belongings of his late mother, who died in January 1986. Emptying the drawers of a dresser, he found a small collection of old British coins. After removing most of them, “suddenly I saw a silvery coin appear in mid-air at about my own eye level. It landed on another coin, a mint-condition 2p piece, near the front of the drawer, making the appropriate sound as it did so.” This occurred in a single, seemingly targeted, motion, as “if an unseen hand had lowered it.”

Curiously, neither Mr Cox, nor his wife or father who were also present, were perturbed by the arrival of what transpired to be an early 5p piece. An aerodynamic engineer by profession, Mr Cox experimented at trying to replicate the fall, but the falling coin always bounced off. Perplexed, he mentally appealed to his late mother for another sign, but did not tell anyone. Nothing happened until August, when a Greek 20-drachma piece was found lying on the floor of a little used bedroom by his father. This appearance remained mysterious. (Correspondence in *Psi Researcher,* Winter 1993, pp.13-14)

The maverick psychologist Stan Gooch (1932-2010; obit **FT272:24**) floated the idea of ‘ready money karma’ in his book *The Paranormal* (1978), sharing how as a self-supporting author he experienced ‘out of the blue’ gifts of money. This typically took the form of finding coins or old £1 or £5 notes in the street. “The quantity of money I find lying about in the streets is phenomenal... Principally I find coins, as many silver as copper, sometimes several in the course of one day.”

For Gooch, single £1 notes (withdrawn in 1988) were “quite common”, and “Once I found three £1 notes lying spread out on the pavement in Chancery Lane, in the City of London, in full view of everybody.”



London: July 28, 1956

Price 3d. Weekly

THE PENNY AND THE POLTERGEIST—

"Please, Mister—Did You See The Ghost?"

WHEN 13-years-old David Pearcey, of Esmond Road, Chiswick, was playing in the garden of his parents' new council house on Friday—just a week after the family had moved in—he was struck sharply on the face by a penny.

David suspected a friend of playing a practical joke, but as he looked around the empty garden another penny flew through the air and landed near him.

And then another, and another, and yet another.

David's parents came to investigate, and sceptical at first, suspected their son of a childish prank.

Before the day was out, their scepticism had turned to incredulity, and finally, after a hectic day of mysteriously hurled objects, to a puzzled fear.

Mr. Pearcey, a practical and level-headed man who runs a newsagent's business, called the police when things reached a peak on the same evening.

Using torches, police searched the front garden — and found pennies. David was in the house, answering the questions of a kindly, but slightly suspicious police officer when one of the constables who had been searching the lawn came in to announce that he had been hit by a flying penny.

Restless

The Pearceys passed a restless night. Wherever David went, objects—mostly metal—went too.

"It is as if the boy is magnetised," his mother told me in bewilderment.

Early on Saturday morning, the first of the newspapermen arrived.

"We have had an awful day," Mr. Joseph Pearcey told me, when I arrived later that evening. "Hordes of people have been around. Children stand in droves outside our door, and sightseers are a nuisance."

He showed me a gaping hole in the glass of their front window.

"That's where a spanner hurtled through," he said. "David was outside at the time, but the spanner come from indoors!"

I spoke to David himself for a few minutes. He is a likeable, outspoken, and I believe honest boy.

I warned Mr. and Mrs. Pearcey that it looked as if they might be in for poltergeist trouble.

"If you had told me this two days ago," commented Mr. Pearcey, "I wouldn't have believed you. But now—well, I feel as if I've learned a lot in 24 hours."

A knock at the door heralded the arrival of an Anglican priest from the local church. He shook hands all round, and then gravely began a brief ceremony of exorcism.

David's uncle arrived, and after a brief council of war, the family decided that David should return that night with his uncle to Basildon.

Mr. and Mrs. Pearcey would stay with relatives nearby to give the house a chance to cool off!

Hectic

The party began to break up and people started to leave including one or two visitors whom nobody seemed to know yet who had somehow or other managed to get hold of cups of tea in the course of the evening.

"Let's hope this is the end of it all," said Mr. Pearcey as he shook hands with me at the door. "We've had a hectic day."

As I walked down Esmond Road, although it was now eleven at night three or four young children stood in a caballistic group on the pavement.

"Please, mister," said one, "Did you see the ghost?"

Roy Morgan—a typical demonstrational pose.

DOWN ON THE FARM —AT THE M.S.A.

DEMONSTRATING clairvoyance and clairaudience at the Marylebone Spiritualist Association on Sunday evening, Roy Morgan attemped to relay a message concerning a woman who "fell out of a window."

The contact, who previously had acknowledged certain details offered by Morgan, did not appear to recognise the alleged incident. She did however get a long message, spiced with corroborative detail referring to a period in her life when she had lived on a farm.

Said Morgan: "I get this 'falling out of the window' feeling very clearly. Are you sure you don't recognise it?"

Contact: "Quite sure."

Morgan: "Well now let me elaborate. You have been in some way connected with a farm, with animals."

"Yes."

"There were stables and so on there?"

"Yes, there were."

"You lived here for a period in fact. It was a village — a hilly village."

"Correct."

"It was here that the incident occurred?"

"I'm afraid I can't remember it."

"Now I see a man walking beside you. He is wearing corduroy trousers. Do you know him?"

"I think I do."

"Well, let me see. Wait a minute — he is carrying a storm lamp."

"Yes, that's him. I know who you mean."

"Do you recognise him now?"

"Most certainly I do!"

"He says something about 'Beech House.' Do you remember Beech House, he asks?"

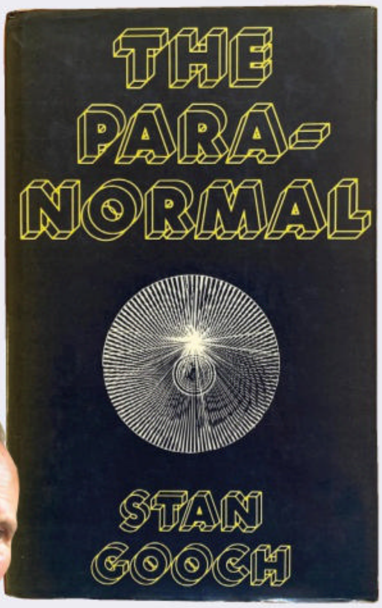
"Yes."

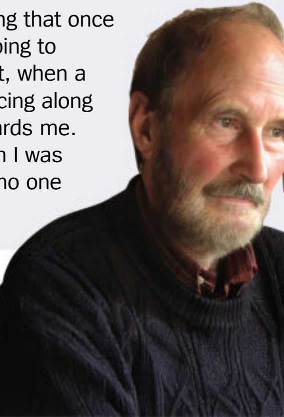
"Now he says that you wouldn't milk cows for some reason or other," stated Roy Morgan.

His contact, a woman, replied with a laugh that she was always afraid of cows.

Although the original, slightly dramatic message concerning the woman falling from a window was never satisfactorily relayed, the simple clarity and honesty of the subsequent message must be counted as above-average clairvoyance.

ABOVE: The case of a family driven out of their house in Edmond Road, Chiswick, after being pelted with coins was told in the *Psychic News* of 28 July 1956. **BELOW**: Stan Gooch discussed the notion of ‘ready money karma’ in his 1978 book *The Paranormal*.





His largest windfall was a £5 note. “I was pondering the fact that I had only £1.50 to last the weekend and was ruefully deciding that once again eggs were going to form my staple diet, when a £5 note came dancing along the pavement towards me. On the hill up which I was walking there was no one in sight. A slight drizzle was falling, yet the note was scarcely wet.” It was after this serendipitous gift that the notion of ‘ready-money karma’ was explained to Gooch by someone named Richard Kirby, who said they represented a cosmic reward for good deeds.

Gooch didn’t believe his fiver was an apport: “It could easily have blown out of a window of one of the houses.” What struck him as significant was this happening whenever he was getting desperate for money. In other cases, money arrived in the form of being overpaid change in supermarkets or tube stations (when it happened in small shops, he gave it back).

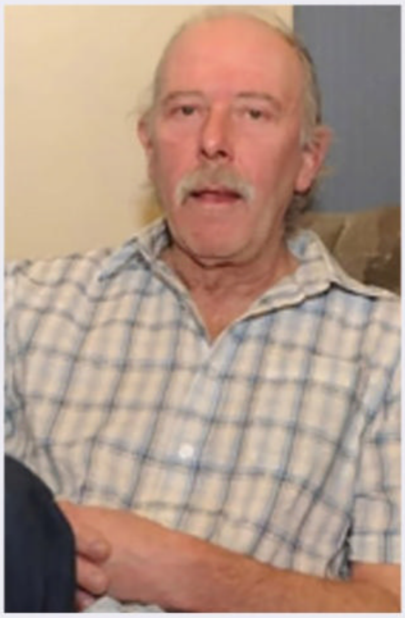
Regrettably, Gooch never undertook any further probing into apports, leaving the riddle of their origin open. A further unresolved question is whether apports actually dematerialise to reassemble at another location or whether they are surreptitiously transported under a 'cloak of invisibility'.

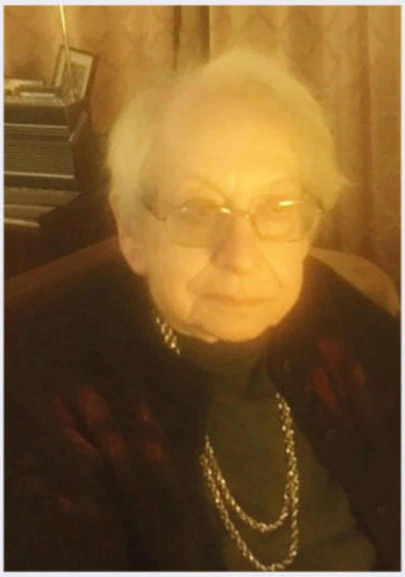
This contrasts with enquiries in the Mexican case where researchers speculated the phenomena arose from the unconscious minds of the couple, noting the husband had once been poor, "literally wishing for money to fall from the sky" earlier in his life, and that as a child he had collected coins. The wife had previously been married and suffered financial difficulties until she divorced. However, the couple were now well off financially, so no simple 'wish-fulfilment' connection could be made. As always, there is a limit to what we can say with confidence about the human mind, its motivations and potentials.

Despite his experiences, Gooch remained quite sceptical about apports, pointing out that objects seldom carry registration and serial numbers, those special alphanumeric codes which enable a specific product to be identified. Obviously, if apported objects bore serial numbers it might be possible (in theory) to establish whether two such objects now existed or, alternatively, to perhaps trace the point of origin from which they vanished. Conceivably, one might ultimately find some distant stranger inexplicably deprived of the item, be it a banknote, an electronic component or, these days, a mobile telephone. With a really valuable item a fascinating court case might ensue to determine competing claims of ownership!

Altogether, apports seem very much events purely of the moment and just for particular individuals; financial reliance upon them is not a long-term investment strategy. It's always pennies from heaven, not sovereigns, ingots and bullion. Miraculous falls of cash are never by the sackful (although the disappearance of sums of money is occasionally claimed as paranormal or the result of some 'curse' or malediction). Rather these incidents, seemingly operate as a message, nudge, a push or a reassurance for a limited audience. Gooch himself ended up seeing them as the Universe telling him "You've still always got your ready money karma".

Perhaps this reminds us (in keeping with numerous spiritual traditions) that there's more to life and death than striving for mere money... and wherever we end up, we won't be needing cash.





LEFT: Retired garage manager Nigel Lee, who was bothered by falling coins and stones at his Doncaster tyre depot. **BELOW**: The late Mary Rose Barrington, who christened such phenomena 'JOTTs'.

Inevitably, it seems the persistent level of puerility and essential triviality of so many such incidents leads to their nonchalant dismissal, even by those witnessing them. Is this a form of cognitive dissonance?

Although Charles Fort speculated about 'teleportation' in *Wild Talents* in 1931, with the theme eagerly taken up by science fiction and fantasy writers, it was not until the 1990s that the late Mary Rose Barrington (1926-2020) started collecting these enigmatic minor physical events and treating them as a class of phenomena in their own right (see **FT391:42-47; 392:20-22**). Having christened them 'JOTTs' – 'just one of those things' – she eventually published a book in 2018 (*JOTT: When Things Disappear*), but it has received little attention. I suspect the superficially minor nature of most apports, typically involving paltry items or a few pence, makes them seem hardly worth bothering about. Many anomaly hunters and forteans would surely seek out more challenging enigmas on a grander scale.

And with British people being herded towards a cashless society owing to many shops, cafes and businesses compelling consumers to use just charge cards, the prospect of coin-tossing poltergeists vanishing altogether may loom, save those with a predilection for old pre-decimal pennies.

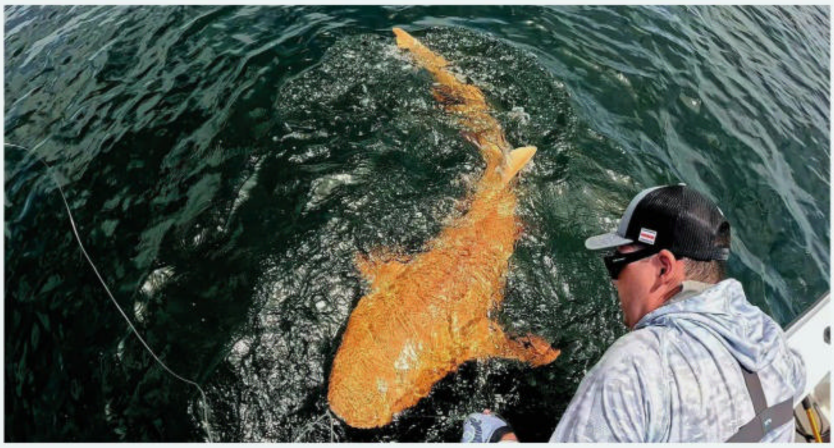
Nonetheless, there just might be anomaly researchers out there sufficiently intrigued by the bizarre comings and goings of apports to record them, focusing especially on any possessing registration numbers.

Doubtless this monitoring work would receive howls of mockery, a task deemed suitable only for bored trainspotters in need of a new and stimulating hobby. Still, given the astronomer Sir Patrick Moore once knew a gentleman who logged the registration codes of bassoons for fun (see Moore's 1972 book *Can You Speak Venusian?*), I live in hope there may be a gallant researcher willing to compile apport catalogues). In fact, I would venture to say the topic might be advanced by following the admirable initiatives of active trainspotters today who use phone apps which enable you to log train sightings, keep track of what you have seen, how many times you've seen it, what classes you've completed, and so on.

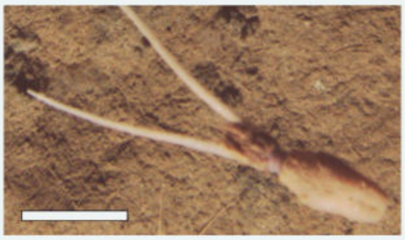
And then, just say for the moment, that if as well as pinpointing the spot where an object appears, you could also trace the location it left? Accordingly, you would then know both the departure portal and the arrival portal of re-emergence (for want of a better term) and, once mapped, perhaps get an inkling as to the prevailing circumstances needed for this phenomenon to arise. There was once a 'premonition bureau'; how about an 'apport bureau'? Opportunities for experimentation might follow, thereby shedding light on the mechanics of teleportation, presuming such is possible. It strikes me that if ever the matter transmitters, teleporters and beaming devices beloved of *Star Trek* and other sci-fi tales are to become a reality, then these curious incidents of materialising objects might be a starting point.

ALIEN ZOO NEWS FROM THE CRYPTOZOOLOGICAL GARDEN

KARL SHUKER heads out to sea in search of colourful sharks and a new squid on the block



LEFT: The bright orange, white-eyed shark that attracted the attention of a group of fishermen in Costa Rica. **BELOW:** Researchers in the Northwest Pacific Ocean not only discovered a hitherto-unknown species of whiplash squid, but also managed to film a previously unobserved behaviour.



WHITE EYES AND ORANGE SKIN

In August 2025, the scientific journal *Marine Biodiversity* contained a shark-themed paper that was colourful in every sense. The shark documented in it was a 6.6-ft- (2m) long nurse shark *Ginglymostoma cirratum*, a species that is normally an unspectacular greyish-brown (or occasionally dull yellow) colouration – but this specimen was anything but unspectacular. Not only did it possess very striking white eyes but in addition its body colouration was an extremely bright orange, a freak condition never before recorded for this particular shark species.

Indeed, it was this very eye-catching shade that had attracted the initially unbelieving attention of a group of sport fishermen in 2024 who had spotted the shark swimming 120ft (37m) beneath the sea surface while they were fishing near Tortuguero National Park off the east coast of Costa Rica in the Caribbean. A local hotel owner, Garvin Watson, lost no time in reeling it in, but after taking some close-up colour photographs of it, they removed the hook from the shark's mouth and then released this golden wonder back into the sea.

Watson's photos came to the attention of a team of marine researchers led by biological oceanographer Marioxis Macías-Cuyare from the Federal University of Rio Grande in Brazil, who disclosed after studying them and speaking directly with Watson that the shark was exhibiting a remarkable, exceedingly rare combined condition never before recorded in any shark species. Namely, albino-xanthchromism, in which its eyes' pupils were white instead of the normal black colour (albinism) and its skin was intense golden-orange (xanthism). Both conditions are known to occur separately, albeit rarely, in sharks, but not together, until now. It is most likely the product of mutant genes, but sometimes environmental stress can induce abnormal colouration, so this shark's anomalous morphology will probably never be explained conclusively.

https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12526-025-01558-5; www.livescience.com/animals/sharks/fishers-discover-first-of-its-kind-bright-orange-shark-with-two-rare-conditions-in-caribbean

NEW SQUID, NEW BEHAVIOUR

Another scientific journal, this time *Ecology*, published in November 2025 a scientific paper documenting the discovery of another marine marvel – this time a hitherto-unknown species of deep-sea squid which had been scientifically observed displaying extraordinary behaviour never previously recorded for any species of these creatures.

In March 2023, a team of researchers was conducting a visual survey of the Clarion-Clipperton Zone (CCZ), an area in the abyssal Northeast Pacific Ocean, using an underwater ROV (Remote-Operated Vehicle) dubbed *Isis*, equipped with multiple cameras. At a depth of 13,450 feet (4,000m), they observed and filmed a previously unknown species of deep-sea whiplash squid – before something extraordinary occurred. One second the squid was clearly visible, the next it had vanished! All that could be seen where it had been moments earlier were two rigid vertical structures that the researchers initially mistook for glass sponge stalks, or possibly tube-worms. It was only when the squid suddenly reappeared as if from nowhere and swam towards the ROV that the secret of its unexpected vanishing act was revealed.

The squid had instantaneously buried its long slender sac-like body upside-down beneath the seafloor's soft sediment, but had left two long tentacles and its short siphon sticking up vertically and motionless above the sediment, which is what the researchers had mistaken for stalks of glass sponges or tube-worms. Such body burial behaviour (but never involving any upside-down positioning) had previously been recorded from certain shallow-water squid species, but never before from any deep-sea one, let alone from one that was new to science.

Owing to this squid's size – mantle length around 4 inches (10cm); tentacle length around 9 inches (23cm) – wide elliptical fins, relatively short arms, and long bright white tentacles, the researchers believe that it belongs to the taxonomic squid family Mastigoteuthidæ, the so-called whiplash squids, named after their extremely long, slender whip-like tentacles. Normally, these squids rest on the sea floor in a posture resembling a tuning fork, which is why this example's wholly different behaviour is so intriguing, and mystifying – why does it do it? The researchers have hypothesised that this may be a form of camouflage used by the squid to conceal itself from potential predators such as beaked whales, and/or serves as a means of attracting prey, mimicking the abundant glass sponges close by, upon whose stalks numerous small crustaceans, a favourite prey, regularly swarm.

The discovery of this very novel squid had taken place during the SMARTEX Project, which is a UK-led expedition to study how deep-sea mining might affect life in the CCZ.

https://esajournals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/ecy.70257; https://www.livescience.com/animals/mollusks/very-novel-and-very-puzzling-unknown-species-of-squid-spotted-burying-itself-upside-down-pretending-to-be-a-plant.

THE CONSPIRASPHERE

With the release of a further, and enormous, tranche of Epstein files, **NOEL ROONEY** notes that older conspiracies are being dredged up again as AI scrapes the Conspirasphere for data.

NEW YEAR, NEW THEM?

Well, perhaps and perhaps not. The Conspirasphere is agog (as per usual) and there is plenty to be agog about; but every current novelty seems to drag the past along with it, or be itself dragged back into the past. This is, to some extent, a traditional trait of conspiratorial thinking; in its pre-Internet days in particular, the prevalence of the grand narrative in conspiracy theory meant that creators of new content tended to orient it by reference to canonical conspiracies from the past. But I have a feeling that something else is happening here.

This new iteration of an old effect may in part be down to another purported novelty; that of AI. This writer is not alone in thinking that the ubiquity of AI (in particular, that characteristic of AI that Emily Bender defines rather nicely as a 'stochastic parrot') is beginning to have an effect on conspiracy theory, as it unfortunately is on much of the online world. In fact, several studies have been published demonstrating that AI, despite the pious aspirations of its developers to discourage conspiracist thinking, does exactly the opposite.

The studies themselves tend to assume that conspiracy theory is a pathology, so one has to pick through the findings; but it is clear that AI is, if not openly encouraging a belief in conspiracy theories, certainly not turning people away from them. A casual query about the JFK assassination, for instance, prompted a number of chatbots to refer to the CIA, the mafia, and other nefarious parties as possibly involved, rather than waving a copy of the Warren Commission report and telling folks to calm down.

The ubiquity of AI is beginning to have an effect on conspiracy theory

When the study went on to enquire about the more recent assassination of Charlie Kirk, the references to JFK reappeared. In some respects, this is an inevitable outcome of the way machine learning works. Massive data scraping is bound to turn up material that is similar in character to the query topic, or has been referred to in the context of that topic by large numbers of people. And since AI systems have no understanding or discernment, this material is happily included in the answers served up by the various species of parrot currently in use.

There are some limits, apparently. The programs almost all point out and discourage racism and sexism, and are quick to highlight anti-Jewish, or anti-Israel, content. That made me wonder: is there just more of this stuff online than anything else (not just discriminatory content but also rebuttals of it) so the programs can't miss it? Or have the coders consciously inserted guardrails against some forms of prejudice, but neglected to do so for the alleged scourge of conspiracy theory? It makes one wonder about purportedly technical terms such as 'training' or 'hallucination'.

It's not just the machines, of course; humans have readily available memory too and, in some cases at least, it's underpinned by an element of understanding, albeit that understanding may seem eldritch at times to those who don't inhabit the C-sphere. Take the latest (rumoured to be the last, though there are also stories that some further hundreds of thousands of pages are still being reviewed prior to release) tranche of Epstein material to be made public; it has kicked off a number of articles harking back to the heady days of Pizzagate. I'm not aware of any references to pizza being picked up from the voluminous slew of data (with millions of pages and hundreds of thousands of images, random references can't be discounted), but one can see how some have made the connection, not least because several of the same personalities are involved in both.

Incidentally, are others as puzzled as I am by the sheer bulk of material now available on the Epstein affair? It makes one wonder at the motives of law enforcement and security operatives. Either that or one has to grudgingly admire the late conman's appetite for work.

I was equally bemused by some of the people who were apparently under Epstein's spell over the years. The Crown Princess of Norway, for instance, is mentioned "hundreds of times" in the released files, it seems, a revelation that could hardly have come at a more difficult time for the Norwegian royal family. In addition, celebrities such as Mick Jagger, Michael Jackson and Diana Ross appear; this is not to imply that any of these people have committed crimes, but their inclusion is unlikely to enhance their reputations.

Some of the allegations picked up by commentators point to another peculiarity of the Epstein files. I have read several testimonies, posted by observers online, which are clearly the work of fantasists. Again, if the police have kept such accounts in the same general files as material that we (would like to) presume is factual, this may well end up compromising otherwise reliable evidence; and that would be a tragedy for the many victims of Epstein's (and at least some of his outsize circus of friends') depravity.

Observant readers will note that my main source for the AI part of this column comes from a well-known conspiracy website. That site, as do many others of the same ilk, regularly warns us that AI will eventually take over and eliminate us. It also, as many others do, uses AI regularly as a kind of verification tool, or provider of background information. This is a paradox that worries me a little. And the same paradox is increasingly the case elsewhere; more and more people are coming to rely on a tool that is neither intelligent nor reliable in a way that undermines their own credibility. That should worry us all.

https://www.sott.net/article/504394-Pizzagate-Exposed-Part-1

https://www.conspiracy.news/2025-11-27-study-ai-chatbots-actively-encouraging-conspiracy-theories.html

NECROLOG

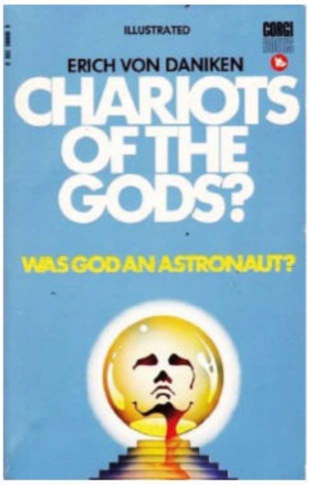
This month, we say goodbye to the prolific, if somewhat less than reliable, author who brought ancient alien space gods to a wider public with his bestselling books

ERICH VON DÄNIKEN

It is probably fair to say that without Erich von Däniken, *Fortean Times* would not have found the receptive audience it did when launching in 1973. While UFOs, earth mysteries and the like were thriving elements of the counterculture, with his 1968 book *Chariots of the Gods?* (that question mark is important) von Däniken made ancient alien gods mainstream in a way they had not been before. His claim that human history had been steered by extraterrestrials had a seismic impact; *Chariots* was a runaway bestseller, and at the time even the most ordinary of households seemed to have a copy of the book, even if they had nothing else remotely fortean on their shelves. *Chariots* also spawned the whole field of modern alternative archæology, opening the doors to Robert Temple, Zecharia Sitchin and Graham Hancock and others; entire TV channels seem to live off his work. Without von Däniken there would be no *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*, no *Stargate*, no *Alien: Prometheus*, no *Eternals*.

The idea of alien space gods influencing human history was not new; Pauwels and Berger had extensively explored it earlier in the 1960s in *Morning of the Magicians*, and Robert Charroux had written several books on the subject. Astronomer Carl Sagan, too, had considered the idea, and the Nation of Islam believed that the white race had been created by an evil alien they called "the Mad Scientist Yakub". Indeed, such was von Däniken's reliance on earlier work that his publisher added several books to the bibliography of *Chariots* in later editions under threat of legal actions for plagiarism. Their authors did, however, appreciate the bump in their own sales that von Däniken's success brought.

MICHAL MANAS / CREATIVE COMMONS



LEFT: Erich von Däniken signing copies of his books in 2006. **ABOVE**: The iconic cover of the 1972 British paperback edition of *Chariots of the Gods?*

Some trace the origin of ancient space gods back to HP Lovecraft, but many of the ideas, minus the aliens, go back to the 19th century with Theosophy's Hidden Masters and Ignatius Donnely's Atlanteans, which by the 1960s had largely been forgotten as fusty relics of a bygone age. What made *Chariots* different was that von Däniken wrote in a direct breezy tabloid style, was unconcerned about academic correctness, had an eye for the sensational, and, like the equally influential Uri Geller a few years later, was an adept self-publicist.

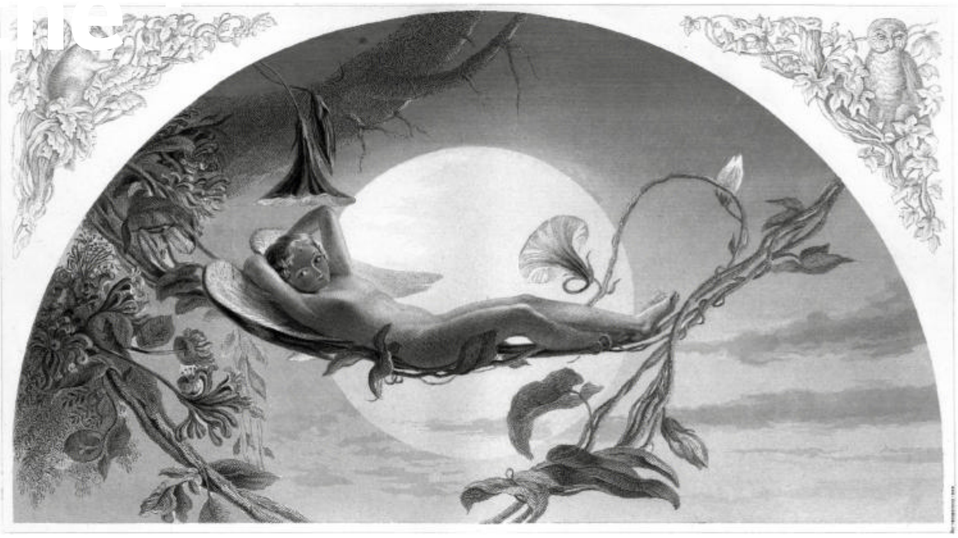
Von Däniken was not the obvious person to write such a book; he was not steeped in history or ufology, nor was he particularly scholarly, and before publishing an article on ancient aliens for the periodical *Der Nordwesten* entitled 'Hatten unsere Vorfahren Besuch aus dem Weltraum?' ('Were Our Ancestors Visited by Extraterrestrials?') in 1964, had not seemed to show a serious interest in anything strange. Instead, he was a Swiss hotelier with a chequered past who spotted an opportunity. At age 19 von Däniken had been given a suspended sentence for theft, and later served a further nine months for fraud and embezzlement. On his release, while working as manager of the Hotel Rosenhügel in Davos, he wrote *Chariots of the Gods?* late at night after the hotel's guests had retired. Rejected by several publishers, it was eventually taken on by Econ Verlag on the condition it was reworked by a professional writer, and was published in German as *Erinnerungen an die Zukunft* ('Memories of the Future') in 1968. It surprised its publisher by becoming a bestseller, and was swiftly translated into English and given its better known title, after which it went stratospheric and sold millions, becoming a worldwide phenomenon.

Von Däniken's suggestion that many ancient monuments were constructed using technologies that humans at the time could not possibly have possessed, and his interpretation of prehistoric images as depiction of extraterrestrials and spaceships, clearly struck a chord with the public, who were eager for more. However, inconveniently for von Däniken, in November 1968, he was arrested for fraudulently obtaining loans amounting to nearly £100,000, which he had spent on foreign travel to research his book. He ended up spending another year in prison and wrote *Chariots*' sequel, *Gods from Outer Space*, behind bars. From then on, von Däniken settled into the comfortable life of a celebrity author, churning out increasingly repetitive and self-plagiarising sequels, more than 25 in all, and making media appearances, becoming a multimillionaire in the process. He even created a not terribly successful theme park based on his ideas, Mystery Park, located in Interlaken, Switzerland, which opened in May 2003 (see **FT169:30-37**).

Critics were often savage about von Däniken; whole books were written refuting his claims, and his work was denounced as pseudohistory, pseudoarchæology, and pseudoscience, and his writing as illogical and unreadable. There were also claims that it was racist, and that his idea was basically "anyone but brown people", which does have some truth to it. Von Däniken never felt the need to apologise for this, as he was "just asking questions", and he had a similarly relaxed attitude to other criticisms. He cheerfully admitted that he had lied, fabricated evidence, and wilfully misrepresented historic artefacts, in the service of what he saw as a higher truth, believing he was leading "a war" against modern science, socialism and communism.

Von Däniken leaves a mixed legacy; on the one hand he highlighted real anomalies in the historical record – there are ancient structures that defy explanation – introduced the unexplained to a massive new audience, and revitalised a whole field of study. On the other hand, invoking aliens denigrated the skills and innovation of ancient humans and distracted from more interesting explanations for their achievements. In addition, his relaxed attitude to the truth did no favours to others working to understand the anomalous, who risk getting tarred with the same brush, however high their standards.

Erich Anton Paul von Däniken, writer on alternative archæology, born, Zofingen, Switzerland, 14 April 1935; died, Unterseen, Switzerland, 10 Jan 2026, aged 90.



FAIRIES, FOLKLORE AND FORTEANA

SIMON YOUNG FILES A NEW REPORT FROM THE INTERFACE OF STRANGE PHENOMENA AND FOLK BELIEF

CHANGELINGS IN COURT

I've recently come to the end of editing *The Exeter Companion to Changeling Lore*, with a team of international scholars. In fact, for much of the last two years, preparing this book, I've not been able to get changelings out of my head.

Changelings, of course, represent the belief that a supernatural being has taken your baby (or occasionally your wife) and replaced it with a supernatural lookalike (see **FT373:30-37**). Sometimes the lookalike is a supernatural being that has taken on your form; sometimes it is just a piece of wood or ash or excrement or even gold that has been 'magicked' into a human shape.

I WOULD GIVE AWAY 20 OF OUR PRECIOUS FOLK NARRATIVES FOR EVERY COURT CASE OF THIS TYPE

The problem with doing a project like this is that changelings are a ghastly subject. After all, here we have children with developmental problems (sickness was the first warning the parents had that the child had been changed). Then, a key part of this belief was that you could only get your real child back by mistreating the 'changeling'.

Our team collected a lot of legends and these were fascinating. But one thing that surprised us all were the number of legal cases. It makes sense, of course. Mothers and fathers, or a magic-worker they'd paid, were brought in to answer charges for the death or maiming of their children, or just for the use of magic, during these counter-exchange rituals. We had, for instance, a witch, Pasqua la Nespola, in 17th-century Sicily who had a mother take her child down to the waterline and wait for the fairies to take it back. There was a healer from 18th-century Sweden, Martha Olufsdotter, who "brought a child no older than five years of age to a crossroad three Thursday nights in a row". There was the cunning man, Ilia Béán, in early 19th century Transylvania who threw a little girl into a heated oven thinking this would bring back the real child. He was decapitated by the local authorities for his troubles. Then there are the score of dreadful cases from Ireland in the 1800s where desperate parents took desperate measures to get their 'true' child back (see **FT324:25**).

For me, these court cases are the most interesting pieces of evidence for changelings, awful as the details unquestionably are. It is an unfashionable view, but I would give away 20 of our precious folk narratives for every court case of this type. Yes, these are terrible reports in which men and women were imprisoned or executed; but we come here as close as we ever will to what individuals really believed in the past.

It is one thing to tell a story, another to live it.

Simon is the author of britishmythology.substack.com

ET goes to the pictures

NIGEL WATSON says it's going to be a busy year for UFO and disclosure-related movies

LEFT: Filmmaker James Fox in Varginha, Brazil, with a model of the alien allegedly seen by three local girls.

JAMES FOX / CE3 PRODUCTIONS

CHARIOTS OF DIRE

Chariots of the Gods (see pp28-35) came out when I was a young teenager, and like many others I was impressed by Erich von Däniken's bestseller. It popularised the idea of ancient aliens for a mass audience, yet looking back, the book does seem very simplistic and unconvincing. As it became increasingly obvious that many of its claims did not bear scrutiny, it taught me the need for critical thinking, especially when dealing with exceptional subject matter.

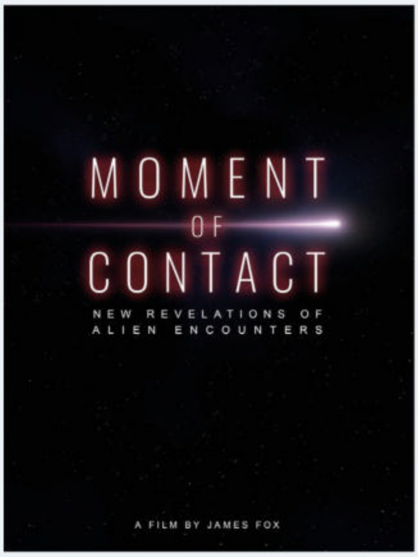
Thanks to Stephen Mera I got to briefly meet von Däniken at the "Erich Von Däniken Legacy Night" held at the Princess Anne Theatre, BAFTA, London, on 15 October 2016. I got drenched in a rain storm on the way to the event, but nothing rained on von Däniken's night of triumph. *Ancient Aliens* TV regular Giorgio A Tsoukalos presented him with the Stella Citizen Award, and the Media Invest Entertainment group announced numerous ambitious projects to exploit the *Chariots of the Gods* brand, including a Hollywood movie, a TV series, live circus/musical spectaculars, video games and theme parks.

Most of those projects died off or got watered down, but it never stopped von Däniken majestically riding on his Chariot. Whatever the critics or sceptics said, they could never shoot it down nor could they put a dent in the zeal of his supporters

FALLIBILITY OF DRONE SPOTTERS

Design Engineer Andrew Hyams, in his article "Putting things into perspective: the fallibility of expert drone spotters" points out that a 'drone' sighting at London Gatwick airport in December 2018 ignited a media frenzy and many more copycat sightings (see **FT406:40-41**). Just as with classic UFO scares, wild theories were put forward and people were accused, and at the end of the day no rogue drone operator was ever found.

Neurosurgeon Italo Venturelli claims to have seen a body that "was not from this planet"


MOMENT
OF
CONTACT
NEW REVELATIONS OF ALIEN ENCOUNTERS
A FILM BY JAMES FOX

Hyams also notes how so-called expert witnesses, like pilots, are as vulnerable to misperception as any other witnesses. He cites as an example a police helicopter that spotted flashing red lights orbiting the RAF Lakenheath air base on 22 November 2024. Presuming them to be drones, the helicopter attempted to intercept them by ascending to a height of 5,000 feet (1,524 metres) and reaching an airspeed of 150 mph (241 k/ph). The swarm of drones came straight towards the aircraft and as they got within a quarter of a mile (400 metres), the helicopter had to dive to avoid what seemed like an inevitable collision.

In response to this encounter, the UK Airprox Board (UKAB) obtained camera footage, radar and radio recordings from the National Police Air Service (NPAS) and collated with reports from United States Air Force (USAF) personnel at the base. UKAB discovered that a USAF F15 fighter jet, orbiting the base in preparation to land, matched with the helicopter's radar and camera footage. It was several miles away and the red lights were attached to the aircraft and not to any rogue drone or drones.

Fortunately, there was no danger of collision, but it does show how easy it is for a pilot to see a light or lights that seem much closer, moving in an unusual or unexpected manner.

www.skeptic.org.uk/2026/01/putting-things-into-perspective-the-fallibility-of-expert-drone-spotters

www.airproxboard.org.uk/uploadedFiles/Content/Standard_content/Airprox_report_files/2024/Airprox%20Report%202024294.pdf

BRAZIL'S 30-YEAR-OLD ROSWELL

A UAP (UFO) Press Conference was held at the National Press Club, Washington, DC, on 20 January 2026, organised by filmmaker James Fox in order "to present new evidence related to alleged non-human encounters and crash-retrieval programs." In other words, to rehash old UFO stories to those who have little knowledge of the subject.

Part One of the conference acted as a showcase for Fox's latest documentary *Moment of Contact: New Revelations of Alien Encounters*, which is an update of his 2022 film *Moment of Contact*. Both concentrate on the recovery of aliens and their craft at Varginha, Brazil. Retired USAF Colonel Fred Claussen affirmed that if alien bodies and craft were recovered by the USAF, at least 40 Americans must have direct knowledge of this operation, and he beseeched them to come forward.

Slightly more compelling is the testimony of neurosurgeon Italo Venturelli, who claims to have seen a body at the Regional Hospital, Varginha, that he says was “not from this planet.” Initially, in 2023, he stated he did not actually see the alien directly, but was shown it in a short video clip. He downplayed this because he wanted to protect his career, but now, after a near-fatal heart attack, he says he had direct contact with the body for four minutes after it was brought to his hospital by a military guard.

A two-volume, 600-page, official army report claims that the army did not recover any alien bodies or spaceships, and that the three girls who saw a short, red-eyed creature with three horns were mistaken. The girls deny they saw a local person with mental disabilities, as has been suggested, rather than a devilish alien. Certainly, there is no physical evidence, as the USAF conveniently whipped it away according to those who believe in this case. On the eve of the 30th anniversary celebrations, the Superior Military Court still adheres to the explanation that the whole case is based on fabrications and rumours.

As for Part Two of the conference, it called for any “nonhuman biologics” – that’s alien bodies in plain English – to be made public. Good luck with that.

howandwhys.com/doctor-saw-varginha-alien-in-a-20-sec-video-from-1996-brazil-ufo-crash/

english.elpais.com/international/2026-01-20/the-et-of-varginha- captivates-brazil-30-years-after-sighting-dismissed-by-a-military-investigation.html

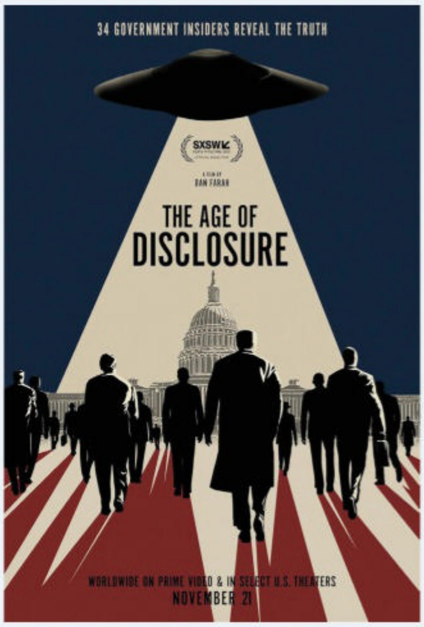
AGE OF EXPOSURE

The Age of Disclosure, a documentary by director Dan Farah, aims to put pressure on the US Government to tell the public about the 80-year-long secret global conspiracy to reverse-engineer non-human technology. It was filmed over a period of three years, under tight security, and features 34 current and former officials from government, military and intelligence circles.

The film includes Secretary of State Marco Rubio, who states that numerous UAPs have been seen over nuclear sites and that previous US presidents have had only limited information on this subject. The usual suspects, including US Christopher Mellon, Anna Luna, Robert Salas, Garry Nolan, Travis Taylor and Hal Puthoff also go on about alien materials and secret government programmes, and – red flag alert! – Luis Elizondo narrates the whole thing.

When released on Amazon Prime Video in November 2025, it became their highest grossing documentary and on the Rotten Tomatoes website it has received a 92% popularity rating. Although very popular with viewers, critics have given it a 27% rating based on 11 reviews, on the same site.

One critic, Daniel Fienberg writing for *The Hollywood Reporter*, is irritated by Farah’s rhetorical interviewing technique, and notes: “My problem with *The Age of Disclosure* isn’t the lack of opposing voices. It’s that there couldn’t be experts debunking anything here. Nothing is proven, and thus nothing can be refuted.” Most reviews agree that it looks superior to most UFO TV documentaries, but it is merely an echo chamber for UFO believers that provides no new proof or evidence. On the International Movie Database one review neatly labels it as “a fantasy-driven conspiracy mockumentary”.


34 GOVERNMENT INSIDERS REVEAL THE TRUTH
SXSW
A FILM BY
DAN FARAH
THE AGE OF
DISCLOSURE
WORLDWIDE ON PRIME VIDEO & IN SELECT U.S. THEATERS
NOVEMBER 21

MATT BECKER / CREATIVE COMMONS

The popularity of such films, the lure of disclosure, plus Steven Spielberg’s *Disclosure Day* film due for release in June, means that we are likely to get many more films pushing this agenda, no doubt with the same talking heads and empty promises.

Joseph Kosinski, the director of *Top Gun: Maverick* and *F1*, for example, is working on a “science fact” film about two men who uncover a secret programme dedicated to recovering and reverse-engineering crashed UAPs. His main consultant is UFO whistleblower David Grusch, so it’s more likely to end up as science fiction than science fact. Who cares, as long it sells popcorn?

Scott Cooper, writer and producer of *Springsteen: Deliver Me From Nowhere*, is also down to write and direct a thriller about the Roswell incident. Another UFO golden oldie, the Betty and Barney Hill abduction case, is slated to become a feature film starring Demi Moore and Colman Domingo, directed by Roger Ross Williams. *Strange Arrivals* is being sold as an alien-themed romance story.

Amongst this avalanche of UFO films, there might be a few that are more credible and worthwhile, and not simply rehashes of the disclosure debate.

A sobering antidote to all the hype is a newly released documentary, *Saucers Spooks and Kooks*, directed by Christopher Graybill and written by Adam Gorightly. Based on Gorightly’s book of the same title, it tells the sad story of Paul Bennewitz, who was used to spread UFO disinformation in the 1980s. This modest counterintelligence campaign helped incubate such themes as the Greys, underground bases, cattle mutilations and crashed saucers that struck a chord with alien abduction researchers and reached a mass audience in *The X-Files*.

GOLDEN DOMES

Golden Domes is allegedly the name of a programme run by senior intelligence figures James Clapper and Stephanie O’Sullivan from 2007 to 2010. It was a joint CIA and USAF project that could detect and track UAPs, and had electronic and laser-based weaponry capable of shooting down “exotic non-human vehicles”. No specific incidents of UAPs being shot down, and under what circumstances such an action would be taken, are given. It would also have meant there was a massive secret worldwide operation to recover any downed craft. David Grusch confirms that this programme existed and says that Clapper knows more about it than he lets on. Grusch also alleges that the late Vice President Dick Cheney exerted control over UAP-related activities like a “mob boss.” Did he make the aliens an offer they couldn’t refuse?

www.liberationtimes.com/home/new-allegations-link-former-national-intelligence-leaders-clapper-and-osullivan-to-ufo-shoot-down-and-retrieval-program

COVID COMMUNICATIONS

What were you doing during the Covid crisis? Chris Berryman, had a series of channelled communications with N-1, a multi-dimensional being originating from the Sirius constellation. His book *The N-1 Sessions: Seasonal Reflections from the Outer Dimensions of Light* (6th Books, 2026) is a year-long diary of his communications along with a Q & A session with N-1, and a guide to body-mind exercises to enable these communications.

In the Q & A sessions, N-1 tells him that they will continue to contact us in our dreams and through playful sensory communications, but only when it is safe will they risk any bolder interactions. The aliens warn of the dark forces of alien master manipulators who numb and restrict us from seeing reality. In contrast, N-1 is part of the Orion Contingent of elders and initiates, members of a vast galactic cooperative grouping of star races, who wish to help humanity.

There is nothing really astounding about Berryman’s communications as they align with similar stories from other psychic explorers, and with what Steven Greer calls the ‘CE5 Protocol’, which shows how to initiate direct, intentional communication with extraterrestrial beings using meditation, focused intention, and coherent thought. It is significant that such contacts usually concur with the person’s own knowledge-base and beliefs. This leads us to wonder if these messages are really from beyond, or are they the product of a psychological feedback loop?

CHARIOTEER OF THE GODS

CHARIOTS OF THE GODS?
WAS GOD AN ASTRONAUT?
THE GOLD OF THE GODS
IN SEARCH OF ANCIENT GODS
RETURN TO THE STARS
GODS FROM OUTER SPACE
SIGNS OF THE GODS?
MIRACLES OF THE GODS
A HARD LOOK AT THE SUPERNATURAL
CORGI
ERICH VON DANIKEN

JASON COLAVITO EXPLORES THE LIFE AND WORK OF **ERICH VON DÄNIKEN,** THE SWISS HOTEL WORKER TURNED AUTHOR WHO TURNED THE ANCIENT ASTRONAUT THEORY INTO THE GOLD OF THE GODS...

When Erich von Däniken died in Interlaken, Switzerland, at the age of 90 on 10 January, I was offline for the weekend. My parents had come to visit their grandson after a major snowstorm had delayed their usual Christmas trip, and we were busy celebrating a somewhat belated holiday. Before I logged off, I idly wondered why there were so many new posts about *Chariots of the Gods*, but when you write about UFOs and ancient astronauts on social media, it's not all that unusual. I did not find out about the ancient astronaut theorist's death until 12 hours after his daughter announced it in conjunction with his disciple, Giorgio Tsoukalos, of *Ancient Aliens* fame.

It was, perhaps, appropriate that my parents were in town when Erich von Däniken died since it was due to my father that I had any idea who von Däniken was in the first place. I am in my mid-forties, and growing up, he was not exactly a household name. But back in the 1970s, when Erich von Däniken was briefly a major celebrity and his bestseller *Chariots of the Gods* a cultural phenomenon, my father had become enamoured of the ancient astronaut theory after watching the 1973 NBC-TV adaptation of *Chariots*, *In Search of Ancient Astronauts*, hosted by Rod Serling. As a result, he purchased *The Gold of the Gods* (1972), at that time von Däniken's newest book, and the volume moved with him to the apartment he shared with my mother after they wed and then to the home where I grew up. It sat on the living room shelf alongside my mother's college textbooks and my father's reference books, untouched until I found and read it around the age of 12. He kept it largely because it was a hardcover with colour photos. Had it migrated to the trash with his other tattered paperbacks of the era, my life might have turned out very differently.

NO AUTHOR OF ANCIENT MYSTERY BOOKS MANAGED TO BECOME AS BIG A CELEBRITY AS VON DÄNIKEN

THE GOLD OF THE GODS
Erich von Däniken
author of
CHARIOTS OF THE GODS
GODS FROM OUTER SPACE

LEFT: The author grew up with his father's copy of von Däniken's 1972 book *The Gold of the Gods*.

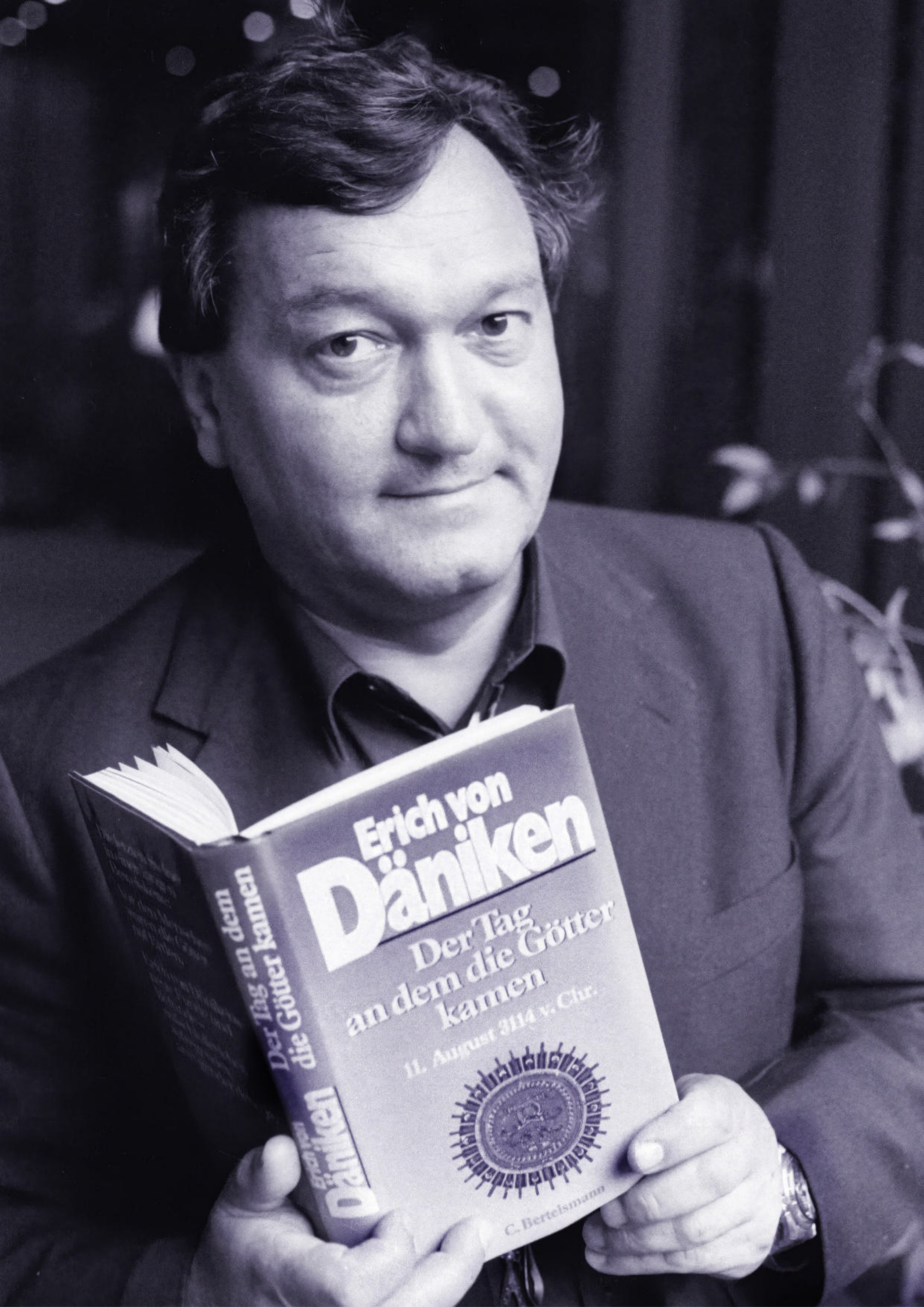
That's not because von Däniken was a major influence on me. Indeed, even as a teenager in the 1990s I found his books to be sloppy, poorly written, and much less engaging than those of authors who presented themselves more seriously – Graham Hancock, for instance, seemed more respectable. However, no author of ancient mysteries managed to become as big a celebrity as von Däniken, nor has any subsequent author become as synonymous with ancient aliens and prehistoric lost civilisations as he was. And no author in the genre became as immune to criticism through sheer audacity and force of will as von Däniken. Who else could write a whole book teasing a confession of his own mistakes (*Habe ich mich geirrt?* – "Did I Get It Wrong?" – 1985) only to conclude that the errors were simply due to being too right?

I'm afraid we will not see his like again. The genre will be poorer without him in it, if only because his imitators steal from their sources with less panache and spend their days in anger and outrage. If nothing else, von Däniken always seemed to be smiling, even when upset. He told *Playboy* 1974 that he travelled 100,000 miles (160,000 km) per year for paid speaking engagements, television appearances, and "research," a tireless but very lucrative schedule unmatched by his successors. Even at his nadir in the late 1980s, he told the *Chicago Tribune* he still travelled 65,000 miles (106,000 km) per year. He was a natural conman, and he played the part as well as any of the other famous hoaxers and grifters of the mid-20th century.

BIRTH OF THE ANCIENT ASTRONAUTS

Erich Anton Paul von Däniken was born in Switzerland in 1935, raised a strict Catholic, and in Catholic school developed an interest in UFOs, like many youths in the early

IMAGO / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO


Erich von
Däniken
Der Tag
an dem die Götter
kamen
11. August 3114 v. Chr.
C. Bertelsmann
Der Tag an dem
die Götter kamen
Erich von
Däniken

KEYSTONE PRESS / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE LEFT: The young Erich von Däniken. **ABOVE RIGHT**: 1969: Von Däniken on his way to one of his various court appearances for embezzlement, fraud and falsifying records. **BELOW**: An early English edition of *Chariots of the Gods*; the cover shows the Palenque tomb of Pakal the Great – an ancient astronaut in his rocket?

1950s. He had a criminal record. He was convicted of theft when he was 19, and left school to become a hotelier. He was convicted of embezzlement after leaving that job. He took another hotel position, and he stole money there, too, by falsifying records in order to obtain more than £98,000 in fraudulent loans to finance his interest in space aliens and what the court later called his "playboy lifestyle". His defence was that he meant no harm and the banks were at fault for giving an untrustworthy fraud like him a loan in the first place. The court psychiatrist declared him a pathological liar. Eventually, he would be convicted of embezzlement and fraud yet again, serving a year in prison.

In 1960, two French authors who were interested in the occult, Nazis, UFOs, and horror fiction author HP Lovecraft put out a book called *Morning of the Magicians* in which they tried to show that Lovecraft's fictitious vision of ancient aliens colonising the prehistoric Earth could be correlated to the "occult" truths of Theosophy, forteana, and the UFO movement. Jacques Bergier and Louis Pauwels put together the entire case for ancient astronauts as we currently know it – from the claims about ancient atom bombs to the ideas about "impossibly" precise and heavy stone architecture. Their book became a cult classic among English- and German-speaking young people and inspired several volumes by the French author Robert Charroux, who presented Bergier's and Pauwel's discursive, disorganised ideas in a more popular and readable format. These authors were not the first to write about "ancient astronauts" – versions of the idea dated back decades by that point in both fiction and nonfiction – but they turned the ideas into books that sold well and broadly at a time when young people were especially open to the suggestion.

CHARIOTS OF THE GODS?
Unsolved mysteries of the past
ERICH VON DANIKEN

CHARIOTS OF THE GODS WAS LONG ON UNPROVEN SPECULATION AND SHORT ON FACTS

In 1964, von Däniken simply appropriated this material wholesale for a magazine article in the December issue of *Der Nordwesten*, and shortly after he was jailed for fraud involving a jewellery scheme in Egypt. Upon his release, he decided to try his hand at turning his article into a full-length book, which became *Chariots of the Gods*. According to his own legend, he wrote the first draft of the book at night while working as a hotelier by day. In his zeal to fill the book with material he hastily borrowed from a library's worth of dubious sources; in places, he came close enough to plagiarising Pauwels, Bergier, and Charroux that lawyers eventually convinced the publisher to add those authors to the book's bibliography, and in the sequels von Däniken specifically credited them by name, as if to assuage hurt feelings. Von Däniken went a step beyond his sources, though, in deciding that Jesus was a space alien along with the pagan gods.

However, he had trouble finding a publisher for his shambolic, hyperbolic manuscript. Eventually, one publisher took the book. Econ Verlag found the manuscript less than satisfactory, but saw enough promise in it that they tasked an ex-Nazi film producer, writer, and editor, Wilhelm Utermann (also known as Wilhelm Roggersdorf), the former editor of the Nazi Party newspaper *Völkischer Beobachter*, to punch it up. En route, Utermann cut out claims about Jesus's alien origin, and von Däniken forever after asserted Jesus was the exception to the alien rule. To avoid saying anything demonstrably false, Utermann phrased every assertion as a question – 238 rhetorical questions, in fact – leaving the book long on unproven speculation and very short on evidence and facts. To make up for it, Utermann retained and enhanced the book's bombast, conveying the author's excitement and enthusiasm in no uncertain terms. The contrast with the dry, pseudo-intellectual pretensions of *Morning of the Magicians* could not have been greater.

PLAYBOY INTERVIEW: ERICH VON DANIKEN

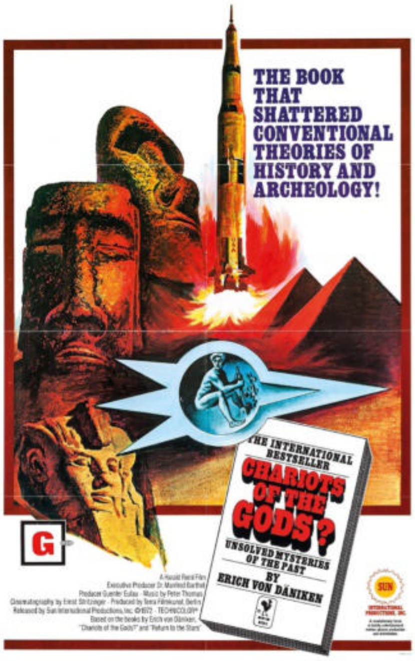
a candid conversation with that publicist for ancient astronauts, the best-selling author of the cult classic "chariots of the gods?"

ABOVE: Erich von Däniken the celebrity – appearing in *Playboy* magazine and as a guest on *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson*, alongside Liberace. **BELOW**: The 1973 NBC-TV adaptation of *Chariots of the Gods* fuelled von Däniken's growing popularity, being watched by 13% of the US population on its first broadcast.

DÄNIKITIS

Erich von Däniken's *Chariots of the Gods? Unsolved Mysteries of the Past* was published in early 1968 as *Erinnerungen an die Zukunft: Ungelöste Rätsel der Vergangenheit (Memories of the Future: Unsolved Mysteries of the Past*) and rapidly achieved bestseller status, selling more than 200,000 German-language copies in its first year of release and launching a wave of what German magazine *Der Spiegel* quickly called *Dänikitis*, or the obsessive desire to talk about ancient astronauts. He titillated everyone from the professional class to bored *hausfraus* with ideas that didn't just flatter his audience's intellect, but also appealed to middle-class readers' sublimated interest in the Sexual Revolution: "I say in my books not only that we have been visited from outer space in ancient times but that those visitors had sexual intercourse with our ancestors," he proudly proclaimed in *Playboy* magazine.

An English translation of *Chariots* by Michael Heron soon followed, released in Britain in 1969 and the United States in 1970, both as a book and as a serialisation in the *National Enquirer* tabloid newspaper. The public shrugged off a spate of virulently negative press reviews – von Däniken was "shilling the rubes" the *New York Times* said in savaging the book – and warnings from archæologists that *Chariots* wasn't true. Although the book was neither the first nor the best to discuss the ancient astronaut theory, its fortuitous timing, coming during the heyday of *2001: A Space Odyssey* and the Apollo Moon missions, and its careful revision by Utermann, turned what even the publisher later conceded was largely a plagiarism of earlier authors like Bergier, Pauwels, and Charroux into a synonym for the ancient astronaut theory.


THE BOOK THAT SHATTERED CONVENTIONAL THEORIES OF HISTORY AND ARCHEOLOGY!
THE INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER
CHARIOTS OF THE GODS?
UNSOLVED MYSTERIES OF THE PAST
BY ERICH VON DÄNIKEN
G
SUN

This status was cemented by the popular movie version, originating in an Oscar-nominated German adaptation directed by Harald Rienl and best known from the re-edited version adapted for television by Alan Landsburg and narrated by Rod Serling that aired on NBC in 1973 as *In Search of Ancient Astronauts*. The book was adapted for television at least three more times, as *In Search Of…* (1977-1982), a spin-off of the movie, as a 1990s-era ABC pseudo-documentary starring von Däniken and *Home Improvement* actor Richard Karn, and as *Ancient Aliens* (2009 pilot, series 2010-present), the longest running and most successful ancient astronaut series in television history. The original movie, in its original German version, dubbed British adaptation, and re-edited Serling-helmed edition, probably did more to popularise the ancient astronaut theory than any other single piece of media, even the *Chariots* book. The 1973 NBC-TV version was seen by 28 million Americans on the day of its first broadcast – an astonishing 13 per cent of the entire US population – and led to 250,000 additional sales of *Chariots* in 48 hours – the single largest audience for ancient astronaut media in history. (By contrast, *Ancient Aliens* peaked at around two million weekly viewers in its early days before falling to a few hundred thousand in the last reported US ratings.) More people globally saw the film than ever read the book, and it overawed critics, who had never seen a dishonest documentary before. Combining false claims with the dry æsthetics of a science film, the film turned professional critics into believers. In the *Los Angeles Times* in 1974, Kevin Thomas raved that the film was "astoundingly persuasive", in large measure because it seemed so serious.

Von Däniken took to the media to promote his books – though, really, himself – in the wake of the film's success. He appeared on *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson* on 4 October 1973 alongside fellow guests Liberace and Dennis Weaver. He sat for a lengthy interview with Timothy Ferris in *Playboy* magazine in 1974.

GOLD FROM THE GODS

Thanks to the movie driving massive book sales, *Chariots* met with unprecedented success. It was, quite possibly, the bestselling archæology book of the 20th century. Four million copies sold in the first five years, and it racked up another three million sales by its 20th anniversary. By contrast, the bestselling mainstream archæology book, CW Ceram's *Gods, Graves, and Scholars* (1949), took six decades to sell five million copies. No other book of its genre approached anything like those sales. The biggest UFO books prior to *Chariots* never came close. *The Interrupted Journey* (1966) reportedly sold around 300,000 copies in its first years, and George Adamski's *The Flying Saucers Have Landed* (1953) sold around 200,000.

But much to von Däniken's dismay, the contract he had signed with Econ stripped him of most of the profits from the book and its adaptations for 30 years, until the control of the copyright returned to him in 1998. He reportedly earned just seven per cent of the net profits rather than a traditional royalty – but still a hefty amount. The money he did make went to pay off debts from embezzlement and fraud, of which he had once again been convicted; so, with little choice but to forge ahead, while serving another prison sentence in 1970, von Däniken wrote *Gods from Outer Space*, a sequel he would sell to publishers worldwide on more favourable terms. However, he erred in trying to sound more respectable and serious, and sales disappointed. He learned his lesson and quickly threw together *The Gold of the Gods* in his more excited and bombastic register, and the book became the foundation for his future financial success. Five more books followed in the next few years and many more thereafter.

After about 25 books of varying quality, von Däniken ended his life having sold 63 million copies. Even a 1978 comic book adaptation sold five million copies. He had become a millionaire many times over.

His success afforded him the luxury of admitting that he lied, cheated, and carelessly published anything that might bolster his claims whenever and wherever it suited him. He told *Playboy* that he had lied – he called it using "theatrical effects" – about seeing a golden library of alien texts in Ecuador, and he admitted to others that he fabricated evidence to make his ideas seem more solid. The gold library claim – the focus of *The Gold of the Gods* – was especially audacious. The man who supposedly discovered the Tayos Cave of alien gold, Juan Moricz, publicly claimed von Däniken had never visited it. Von Däniken wouldn't concede that his visit was a complete fake, but he admitted to fudging many of the details (supposedly to protect the site) and conceded that he never checked whether the objects were actually made of gold before reporting on them. All was fair, he said, when fighting "a war we have to win" to overturn modern science. Astronaut Neil Armstrong joined a 1976 expedition to explore the cave, and when the expedition found no gold and no alien workmanship, newspapers had a field day, publishing headlines like "THE CHARLATAN MAKES A FOOL OF HIMSELF" and "DÄNIKEN UNMASKED!"

Von Däniken became angry when the controversy would not go away, and he recognised that this was the beginning of the end for his time in the spotlight. A popular author could not withstand the double-whammy of confessing fabrication *and* being publicly debunked by a global hero. But the public had moved on. Von Däniken continued to write books, but they sold fewer copies, and he was no longer the media darling he had been.

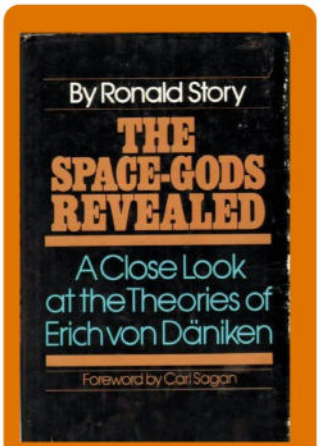
AN UNSERIOUS MAN?

That waning interest, and the declining book sales that dogged Von Däniken into the 1980s, meant that he could get away with lies, fabrications and worse, with only the occasional rebuke. In *Signs of the Gods* (1979) he called the black race a "failure" and speculated that aliens cre-

ERICH VS THE EXPERTS

ABOVE: Von Däniken in the BBC's 1977 *Horizon* programme debunking his ideas. **BELOW**: Ronald Story's 1976 critique of von Däniken's books.

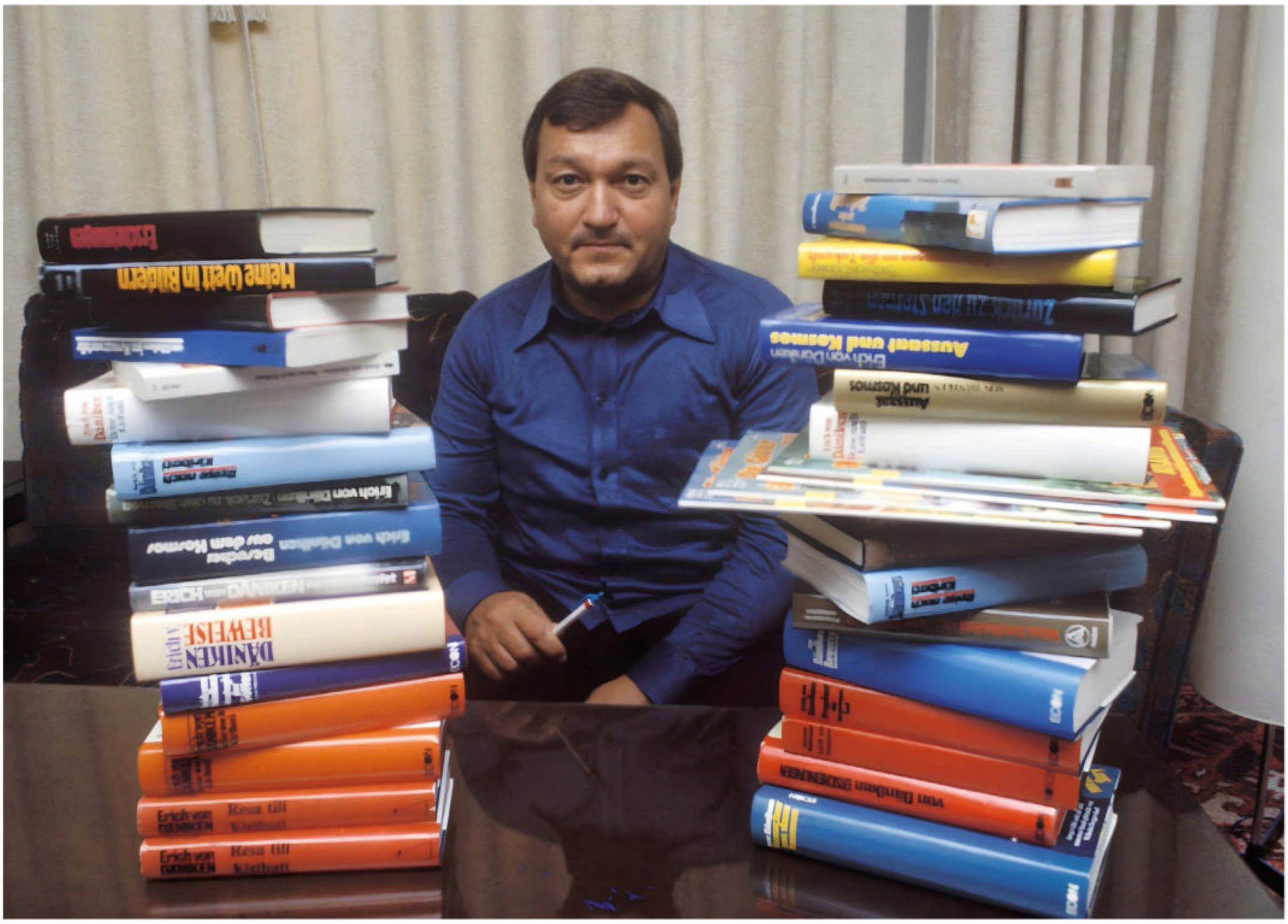
To the dismay of archæologists, the public had difficulty distinguishing between von Däniken's books and real archæology. A 1984 public survey in England asked respondents to name an author of archæological books, and the most frequent name given was Erich von Däniken. This inevitably influenced the field of archæology itself. Archæologist Ken Feder surveyed 1,000 college archæology students in 1984 and found a quarter of them believed to some extent in ancient astronauts. While few maintained that belief in the face of evidence, there is some indication that von Däniken inspired some of his young readers to become archæeologists. Nevertheless, the bigger impact was on the public understanding of archæology as a science. It soon became a depressingly common part of an archæologist's job to refute ancient astronaut claims in the media, teach units or even whole courses rebutting von Däniken's false claims, and weather accusations from members of the public that they were conspiring to hide alien evidence.



Meanwhile, across the scientific community, there was widespread consternation about von Däniken's popularity. The astronomer Carl Sagan, who had himself toyed with the ancient astronaut theory in the early 1960s, dismissed von Däniken's ideas as "pop religion". Scientists from many different disciplines – astronomy, biology, engineering, and more – pointed to implausible claims and outright errors related to their specific fields. They also worried that von Däniken's pseudoscience would damage the public's attitude toward real science. The *Daily Telegraph* went so far as to claim after von Däniken's death that he was the godfather of our entire anti-science, post-truth era. The interest generated by von Däniken and the dozens of imitators who flooded bookstores with supposed mysteries and conspiracies led directly to scientists and sceptics founding the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (now the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry) and its magazine, *Skeptical Inquirer*, in 1976 to combat pseudoscience.

THEY WORRIED VON DÄNIKEN'S PSEUDOSCIENCE WOULD DAMAGE THE PUBLIC'S ATTITUDE TO REAL SCIENCE

However, ancient astronaut claims exploded across cable television, especially on the History Channel in the US, and easily outdrew mainstream archæology on the Internet. Unsurprisingly, by 2017, a Chapman University study found 35% of Americans believed in the ancient astronaut theory, and a 2025 YouGov survey found 47% of Americans now believe aliens visited Earth in the past.

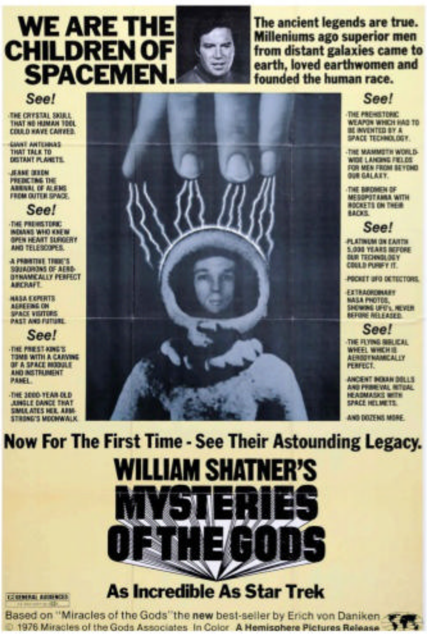


PRISMA BY DUKAS PRESSEAGENTUR GMBH / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE: Von Däniken in 1981 with a selection of his ever-growing series of books. **BELOW**: William Shatner gets in on the ancient astronaut action in the 1976 von Däniken-derived documentary *Mysteries of the Gods*.

ated white people as a "chosen race" to correct their error with black folks. After 11 September 2001, von Däniken became an outspoken critic of Islam, and in the 2010s, the aging ancient astronaut theorist made many eye-watering statements about women and transgender people. But because he cultivated the personality of the *bon vivant*, charming and cheerful and more than slightly ridiculous, none of it stuck to him. He could appear on *The Tonight Show* or in the pages of *Playboy* and laugh off even the most serious of criticisms because he never seemed to be a serious man. He was, he liked to say, just asking questions. Critics contended that he had a boy's "unscrupulous 12-year-old mind" (in the words of *Esquire*) who was simply playacting with the trappings of scholarship. And he became a celebrity for it. Von Däniken's greatest achievement was to make himself bigger than his ideas. At the height of his fame, the story was all about von Däniken, not about the aliens. His books were all about making him famous.

That may be why attempts to refute his half-digested copies of other people's ideas, notably a 1977 BBC *Horizon* episode (broadcast on PBS's *NOVA* in the US the following year) devoted to debunking him or books critical of his ideas, like Clifford Wilson's *Crash Go the Chariots* (1972) or Ronald Story's *The Space Gods Revealed* (1976), did little to dent von Däniken's book sales. Indeed, Wilson went on to write a book *with* von Däniken debating the issue! Instead, what killed the first wave of von Däniken mania was imitation and oversaturation. By the end of the 1970s, so many authors were writing "ancient mysteries" books or republishing books von Däniken had borrowed from shamelessly, while von Däniken himself had written so many flimsy sequels to *Chariots*, that the market simply could not absorb so many works on the same theme, and the market collapsed, falling into a 20-year stupor.


WE ARE THE CHILDREN OF SPACEMEN.
The ancient legends are true. Milleniums ago superior men from distant galaxies came to earth, loved earthwomen and founded the human race.
See!
THE CRYSTAL SKULL THAT NO HUMAN TOOL COULD HAVE CARVED.
GIANT ANTENNAS THAT TALK TO DISTANT PLANETS.
JEANE DIXON PREDICTING THE ARRIVAL OF ALIENS FROM OUTER SPACE.
See!
THE PREHISTORIC INDIANS WHO KNEW OPEN HEART SURGERY AND TELESCOPES.
A PRIMITIVE TRIBE'S SQUADRONS OF AERODYNAMICALLY PERFECT AIRCRAFT.
NASA EXPERTS AGREEING ON SPACE VISITORS PAST AND FUTURE.
See!
THE PRIEST-KING'S TOMB WITH A CARVING OF A SPACE MODULE AND INSTRUMENT PANEL.
THE 3000-YEAR-OLD JUNGLE DANCE THAT SIMULATES NEIL ARMSTRONG'S MOONWALK.
See!
THE PREHISTORIC WEAPON WHICH HAD TO BE INVENTED BY A SPACE TECHNOLOGY.
THE MAMMOTH WORLD-WIDE LANDING FIELDS FOR MEN FROM BEYOND OUR GALAXY.
THE BIRDMEN OF MESOPOTAMIA WITH ROCKETS ON THEIR BACKS.
See!
PLATINUM ON EARTH 5,000 YEARS BEFORE OUR TECHNOLOGY COULD PURIFY IT.
POCKET UFO DETECTORS.
EXTRAORDINARY NASA PHOTOS, SHOWING UFO's, NEVER BEFORE RELEASED.
See!
THE FLYING BIBLICAL WHEEL WHICH IS AERODYNAMICALLY PERFECT.
ANCIENT INDIAN DOLLS AND PRIMEVAL RITUAL HEADMASKS WITH SPACE HELMETS.
AND DOZENS MORE.
Now For The First Time - See Their Astounding Legacy.
WILLIAM SHATNER'S
MYSTERIES OF THE GODS
As Incredible As Star Trek
G GENERAL AUDIENCES
Based on "Miracles of the Gods" the new best-seller by Erich von Daniken
© 1976 Miracles of the Gods Associates In Color A Hemisphere Pictures Release

In Search of…, a show that grew out of the documentary of *Chariots*, barely mentioned ancient astronauts after its first season. In 1978, a biography of von Däniken by Peter Krassa appeared, but even this laudatory tome was forced to ask if "von Däniken [was] at the end of the road."

Instead, von Däniken's greatest legacy was vast influence that his single idea – and a second-hand idea at that – had not just on the paranormal non-fiction genre, but far beyond it. So many people saw and believed that allusions to von Däniken's ideas showed up everywhere. Movies like *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1978) and *The Thing* (1982) referenced von Däniken's claims or his books directly. There were countless comic books that echoed his ideas, with Marvel's Jack Kirby an enthusiastic borrower from *Chariots*. Production documents from *Raiders of the Lost Ark* show that George Lucas and Steven Spielberg drew on *Chariots of the Gods* in creating the film, modelling Indiana Jones's villainous arch-rival on von Däniken and designing the Ark of the Covenant's powers around von Däniken's speculative

VON DÄNIKEN SPEAKS...

ON ARCHÆOLOGY

Archæology? Forget it! I never understood why it is regarded as a science. Archæologists are, mainly, conservative; they are only interested in what our ancestors were wearing or what weapons they had. They presume they had only low-level technology and don't look for anything else. With this approach they would never be able to discover whether a tribe in antiquity had a UFO sighting or had met their gods. They argue that if Atlantis had advanced technology, where are their artefacts of metal, and where are the mines older than 10,000 years? It may well be that the evidence is out there, waiting to be discovered under the ocean or under the ice in Antarctica.

ON GOD

My books destroy the beliefs that make us feel safe. I still believe in a God and I still pray, but my books demolish the idea of an Old Testament god. Our stone age ancestors believed their alien visitors were gods. If you accept this hypothesis, the next questions are "Where do they come from?" and "Were they, in turn, influenced by alien visitors?" And so on, back through millions of years and alien civilisations – there is enough time – until you arrive at the starting point of everything. This is Creation: something we cannot explain, something beyond our understanding... God! So, I do not destroy God. In fact, God becomes a bigger mystery.

ON UFOS

First, I have to say that I have never seen a UFO. Sometimes I have the feeling that when Erich von Däniken shows up they fly away! Many things in modern ufology are rubbish, which leaves a small number of things that we can't explain. My theory is that every culture has included a version of the 'Return of the Gods'. My idea is that thousands of years ago the ETs promised to return; now they are here! But I've never seen one. I'd be so happy to talk to their occupants.

Taken from "Question Everything: Erich von Däniken interviewed" by Bob Rickard, FT169:36-37.

ANDREW BOSSI / CREATIVE COMMONS

ABOVE: In 2003, Erich von Däniken opened his Mystery Park attraction in Interlaken in the Swiss Alps, complete with Mayan temples, Egyptian pyramids, Stonehenge and other 'ancient mysteries'. **BELOW**: Easter Island figures at Mystery Park – presumably lowered into place by alien space ships.

SAMIFO / CREATIVE COMMONS

HIS GREATEST ACHIEVEMENT WAS TO MAKE HIMSELF BIGGER THAN HIS IDEAS

account in *Chariots*, itself stolen wholesale and without credit from older German sources.

Later, von Däniken's ancient astronauts would come to serve as the background mythology for an astonishing array of movies and TV shows, everything from *The X-Files* and *Stargate* to *Transformers*, the *Alien* franchise, and even *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull.*

Von Däniken saw his ancient astronaut theory as a way of promoting traditional moral values and combating socialism and communism. In 1976, he sent President Gerald Ford an unsolicited copy of one of his books and a letter that said socialism was the greatest danger facing the world and conservatives needed to embrace UFO believers to win elections. Ford's staff sent back a glorified form letter. But until the end of his life, he held the same views. He later wrote that the aliens would punish the sexually unchaste as well as uppity feminists when they returned in 2012. (They didn't.) While Ford's team had rejected von Däniken's advice, other conservatives took up the cause, and today UFO conspiracies and ancient aliens are part and parcel of right-wing mythologies the world over. Right-leaning figures like Tucker Carlson and Joe Rogan routinely discuss ancient astronaut claims alongside right wing talking points.

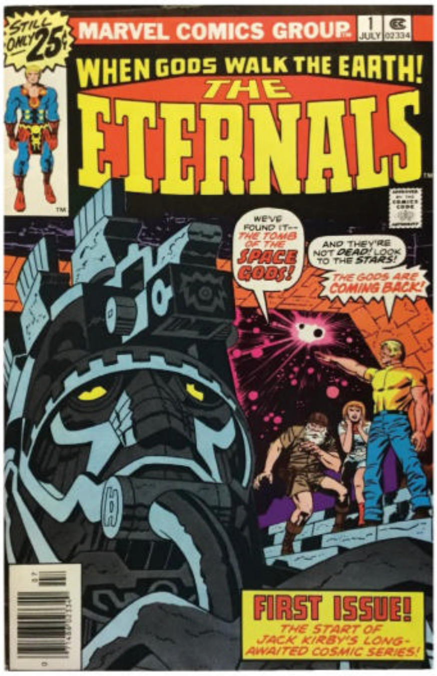
HEIRS AND IMITATORS

Nevertheless, von Däniken never again would achieve the same level of celebrity and fame that he saw in the 1970s. His attempt to revive interest with a von Däniken theme park in Interlaken, Switzerland, called Mystery Park, (see **FT169:30-37**) ended in financial failure, as did a more recent attempt to franchise a *Chariots of the Gods* interactive entertainment experience. He continued to publish books into his 80s, but these were mostly rehashes, or even self-plagiarisms, of earlier, better books, gradually becoming shorter and less coherent as his publishers became smaller and editorial assistance weaker. He remained a fixture on the speaking circuit, but the renewed popularity he achieved in his final decades wasn't due to any new claims or – heaven forefend! – any research.

It was instead a reflection of the success of those he influenced. Graham Hancock credited von Däniken's Ark of the Covenant speculations in *Chariots* with inspiring him to search for the Ark in *The Sign and the Seal* (1992), which launched Hancock's career in ancient mysteries. Although Hancock would later distance himself from von Däniken, von Däniken would piggyback on Hancock's books and release his own versions

ANCIENT ALIENS
HISTORY

HISTORY CHANNEL


STILL ONLY 25¢
MARVEL COMICS GROUP
1 JULY 02334
WHEN GODS WALK THE EARTH!
THE ETERNALS
WE'VE FOUND IT-- THE TOMB OF THE SPACE GODS!
AND THEY'RE NOT DEAD! LOOK TO THE STARS!
THE GODS ARE COMING BACK!
FIRST ISSUE!
THE START OF JACK KIRBY'S LONG-AWAITED COSMIC SERIES!

ERICH VON DÄNIKEN
EVIDENCE OF THE GODS

ZUMA PRESS, INC. / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE: The Von Däniken legacy is currently represented by the huge success of the *Ancient Aliens* TV series, fronted by Giorgio Tsoukalos, now in its 22nd season. **BELOW**: Ancient astronauts were a gift to pop culture, from Jack Kirby's *The Eternals* comics to films like Spielberg's *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.
BOTTOM: Passing the torch: Erich von Däniken and Giorgio Tsoukalos at the Contact in the Desert UFO conference in 2017.

of them, notably 1996's *Eyes of the Sphinx*, written to ride *Fingerprints of the Gods* (1995) mania – ironic given *Fingerprints*' title being chosen to echo *Chariots*. The *Ancient Aliens* television show, originally an adaptation of *Chariots* fronted by von Däniken's onetime personal representative and acolyte Giorgio Tsoukalos, brought a new generation to von Däniken's books, and von Däniken made frequent appearances in the show's early seasons, though these gradually faded from the programme as he aged and the show's focus shifted.

Of all the imitators of von Däniken, Giorgio Tsoukalos comes closest to his mentor in combining smiling enthusiasm, a firm embrace of celebrity and a cavalier attitude toward evidence. But Tsoukalos never wrote a book – ever – and sells only himself, which limited his impact as anything more than a meme. Hancock came closest in rivalling von Däniken for his impact on popular culture – inspiring TV shows, books, movies, and more – and getting his name in the media. But Hancock wanted the scholarly respectability and credibility that von Däniken always treated as a costume for the character he played. As a result, Hancock's frequent storms of rage and attempts to ape serious scholarship prevented him from reaching the same level of mainstream celebrity, even if his Netflix TV series made headlines and Joe Rogan made him a regular guest. Anger and outrage, it seems, overtook many, if not most, of von Däniken's intellectual heirs, who spend their days lashing out on social media and ranting on podcasts and at conferences – a poor substitute for von Däniken's oversized celebrity persona.

I never spoke directly to Erich von Däniken despite writing about the same subjects for 25 overlapping years and even once appearing in the same documentary with him. I tried to interview him in 2004 when I was writing my book *The Cult of Alien Gods*. This was long before I had a reputation as a critic of ancient astronautics, though I had by that time published an article in the American *Skeptic* magazine about von Däniken's borrowings from *Morning of the Magicians* and thus indirectly from HP Lovecraft. Giorgio Tsoukalos prevented me from speaking with him. Tsoukalos had taken a dislike to me in 2002 when I was in college (he graduated from the same school and lived down the street from campus) and I had interviewed him for a class assignment, so he told von Däniken's private secretary that I had "malevolent intentions" and to forbid me from speaking with von Däniken. Years later, we were invited to the same conference, and the organisers cancelled my invitation, apparently because von Däniken told them to. In 2015, I appeared in an episode of *Codes & Conspiracies* with von Däniken, but we did not shoot our interviews together. Still acting as a celebrity, he insisted on being interviewed in the back of a limousine traveling to some glamorous destination or another, while I shot my part in a basement in upstate New York.

Now that he is gone I will probably miss reading and reviewing von Däniken's zany books, which were usually fun to pick apart precisely for the reason they were easily forgotten – they never seemed all that serious, even if they were larded with racism, colonialism, and anti-intellectualism. Compared to the apocalyptic tone of today's fringe history and the dark patronage the US Government affords to *Ancient Aliens* and its carnival of kooks, the playful nature of the first generation of ancient astronaut writers stands in stark contrast. If nothing else, I will mourn the loss of innocence.

This essay is adapted and revised from material originally appearing on the author's website.

➾ **JASON COLAVITO** is a journalist and the author of numerous books, residing in upstate New York. With a lifelong interest in all things unusual, he has written extensively about historical, archæological, and extraterrestrial mysteries for a quarter century. His website is https://www.jasoncolavito.com/

SUPERNATURAL

1970s Wales, a fairy ring, an otherworldly child, repressed memories, hallucinatory landscapes and layers of menacing whispers and unsettling sounds. With these credentials, *Rabbit Trap* will appeal to connoisseurs of folklore, folk horror and hauntology. **MARIA J PÉREZ CUERVO** spoke to director **BRYN CHAINEY** about his debut feature film and its influences.

© VINCENT PROCHOROFF

With the current dynamics of blink-and-you'll-miss-it cinema releases followed by their drowning in the whirlpool of streaming services, independent films can be easy to overlook, but Bryn Chainey's first full-length feature deserves attention as one of the most interesting folk horror-adjacent efforts of recent years.

Darcy (Dev Patel) and Daphne (Rose McEwen) are a musician couple who seclude themselves in a house in the Welsh countryside to work on their new album, but when Darcy steps into a fairy ring, something slippery and ancient is summoned. The arrival of a mercurial, androgynous child (Jade Croot) reawakens a past trauma, destabilising the delicate dynamics between the couple. At the core of the film are hallucinatory sequences

SOUNDSCAPES

enmeshed in a mythical landscape that seeps through the screen via the power of sound. Chainey, a British-Australian filmmaker, delivers a mood piece that refuses to overexplain the supernatural, relying on atmosphere, an extraordinary soundscape (designed by Graham Reznick, with music by Lucrecia Dalt) and the acting chops of its leads to disorient its audience and, ultimately, to provoke the emotional response elicited by an encounter with the supernatural.

When I first spoke to Bryn to tell him how much I'd enjoyed the film, we chatted about some of our folklore obsessions and our mutual interest in the mystical qualities of sound. To celebrate *Rabbit Trap*'s release in UK cinemas, we expanded on our conversation exclusively for *Fortean Times*.

Maria J Pérez Cuervo: You are half-Welsh, but grew up in England. Why did you decide to set the film in the Welsh countryside?

Bryn Chainey: There are stories of faeries and goblins across the British Isles, but none more so than the regions where the Romans didn't fully conquer: the craggy, boggy, perilous edgelands that were no good for their agriculture or roads – Ireland, Scotland, Cornwall, the Isle of Man, and Wales. Straight lines don't work here; to get where you're going, you need to follow the terrain and its idiosyncrasies. That weird soil is where story and superstition thrive.

My key research text for *Rabbit Trap* was *British Goblins: Welsh Folk-Lore, Fairy Mythology, Legends, and Traditions*, written in 1880 by American journalist Wirt Sikes. The book informed a lot of *Rabbit Trap* – not just in its handling of faerie lore, but entire story beats which grew out of historical faerie encounters. So a particularly Welsh flavour of faerie lore was baked in from the start; setting it anywhere else just wasn't an option.

> "FOLKLORE IS AN ACT OF RESISTANCE TO THE LITERALISM DEMANDED BY THE RULING CLASS"

On a personal level, I was excited to explore Wales further. I've visited family there dozens of times but, as you say, I'd never *lived* there; I actually grew up in England and Australia, then spent my 20s in Germany. *Rabbit Trap* was a chance to connect on a deeper level to my roots: I started learning Welsh and had grand plans to shoot the entire film in Wales and hopefully settle there afterwards. As always in film and life, things didn't work out as planned, but I'm still proud of how grounded in Welsh folklore it is.

Since release I've had a few Welsh people reach out, saying the film has inspired them to go deeper into that side of their culture, which has been quietly surviving in the shadows for millennia. The stories a culture tells itself are important; for me, folklore is an act of resistance against the literalism always demanded by the ruling class.

MC: Why did you end up filming in Yorkshire?

BC: It's a very contained film: three characters in a cottage and the nature surrounding

MAIN IMAGE © MAB RABBIT LTD 2024. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

© MAB RABBIT LTD 2024. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

it. That might sound simple, but finding the right location turned out to be the hardest part of preproduction. We needed somewhere that looked remote but was accessible by road, was available for some very strange renovations, and affordable on our small budget. We searched all over Wales for months and were struggling. To make things worse, very late into preproduction we found out that smoking wasn't allowed on film sets in Wales – not even the smoking of "fake" herbal cigarettes. We were told to use CGI cigarette fire and smoke, or pay a hefty fine. Our characters smoke *a lot* so this was an additional expense we definitely couldn't afford – and it would've looked fake anyway. So we started looking for locations that could double for Wales.

We eventually found a farmhouse in North Yorkshire that had been abandoned for a few decades. The moment I walked in, I got chills: this place felt right. It was being totally renovated soon after, so the owner was open to us trashing the place.

MC: Did the spirit of place align with what you had intended for the film?

BC: I hadn't been to Yorkshire before and was struck by how much biodiversity there was in the surrounding areas: within 30 minutes we had everything we needed and more. Yorkshire offered such a variety of scales: from a claustrophobic cave system to a vast desert of limestone. This all added to the mythic quality of the film. It's a cliché, but the location really became a character – it just took a while to find her.

MC: Your view of both the fairy world and the natural world feels very nuanced. Can you tell us what influenced these views?

BC: I wanted the faerie aspects to feel grounded in the natural world even if they're beyond rational comprehension. That meant drawing from historical and contemporary encounters with faeries and other paranormal beings, Celtic folk beliefs, and the more poetic end of nature writing.

Looking back, it all started with Brian Froud's book *Faeries* (1978). We had a copy of it at home and I pored over it for hours at a time. It's a very beautiful, strange book that's presented not as fiction but as an illustrated encyclopedia. I read it at a crucial point of childhood when my brain was still parsing what was imaginary and real, so I took these creatures to be every bit as natural as badgers and foxes and toads. On some level, I still see them that way.

Froud's work kept popping up in my childhood, since he was an important collaborator on Jim Henson's darker projects: *Dark Crystal, Labyrinth*, and *The Storyteller*. Those three were vital in how my taste formed and how I wanted to portray folkloric beings: not as monsters to be escaped or destroyed, but misunderstood (often oppressed) beings with their own desires, longings, regrets, and dreams. Later on, Tarkovsky's work really hit me as a beacon for how cinema can express spiritual longing, existential dread, and the sublime qualities of nature. Nic Roeg's films also gave me a lot of inspiration on how editing can connect the natural, supernatural and unconscious.

MC: There is no overexplaining of the supernatural in the film. Did you feel the theme required some reverence?

BC: Film, perhaps more than any other medium, is exceptionally well suited for creating an experience through sound, colour, rhythm, story – all of these working in tandem to give the *sensation* of an experience. That was my goal: to share what a supernatural experience *feels* like (at least for these characters) and not explain any more than they understand themselves.

In almost every film that deals with supernatural occurrences, there's a scene in which the protagonists discover a book or letter or tape that explains what the hell is going on, complete with backstory and rules and instructions on how to win. I hate that scene, every single time. It feels insulting, and beside the point. Paranormal encounters are just that: outside of the normal. Reality has just revealed itself to be bigger and weirder than your understanding, so let's pull that thread. To me it's a more humble, honest, exciting and dangerous approach.

Of course, this decision has been met with very mixed reactions. It's a tricky one, the

© MAB RABBIT LTD 2024. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED balance of mystery and exposition, and one that every filmmaker wrestles with. No audience wants to be lost at sea, but it's also annoying to have the sea explained to you rather than being allowed to swim in it. Finding the right balance for me and my audience is something I'll continue to work on.

MC: Did anything strange happen on set?

BC: I mentioned the farmhouse we shot in, and how it arrived after a very long period of searching. The day we first visited it, my production designer and I pulled up in a car. The driveway ended quite far from the house, maybe 50 metres [160ft]. At the other end of it, a small black dog was just sitting there, alone, a silhouette in the gloom. This was an abandoned house, mind, so that was already strange. We got out of the car and started approaching. At that moment, two huge ears popped up from its head. Then it stood up on its hindlegs. Turns out this wasn't a dog but a bloody massive hare. It looked at us for a while then bolted away. This experience definitely contributed to the feeling that, yep, this must be the place.

MC: The characters in *Rabbit Trap* work with sound and record sounds from nature. There are many fascinating connections between sound and the supernatural, both in folklore and in fiction. Which of these stories inspired you?

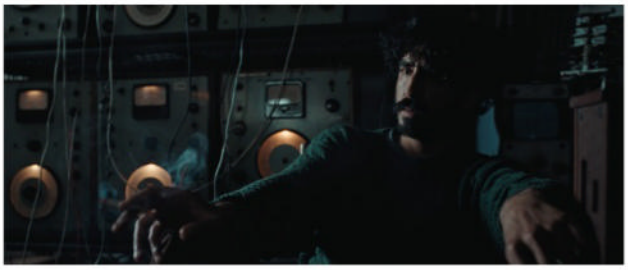
BC: I've always been drawn to stories that connect the inner world with the natural world – whether that's fantasy, horror, folklore, or fairytales. I think that's what music does more natively than any other artform, and why music is crucial to spiritual practice all over the world. It's not a coincidence that the gods and faeries love music: it's a vessel between the imaginative world and the physical one.

A recurring theme with Welsh faerie sightings is that they are intensely musical beings: they're often spotted playing harps and violins, and singing. An important detail is that their music is enchanting but impossible to remember – perhaps because it's so beautiful that remembering it would ruin mortal music forever. If that's so, then like Mole and Rat's encounter with the Piper at the Gates of Dawn, amnesia is a blessing.

In one encounter reported by Wirt Sikes, the faeries' music vanished from memory but their words did not. We ended up using these as the lyrics for the nursery rhyme that recurs in *Rabbit Trap*:

Dowch, dowch, gyfeillon mân,
O blith marwolion byd,
Dowch, dowch, a dowch yn lân.
Partowch partowch eich pibau cân,
Gan ddawnsio dowch i gyd,
Mae yn hyfryd heno i hwn.

I'm reluctant to turn into bald English this goblin song, which in its native Welsh is almost as impressive as "Fi Fo Fum". Let it suffice that the song is an invitation to the little ones among the dead of Earth to come with music and dancing to the delights of the night revel.



© MAB RABBIT LTD 2024. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

MC: How did you create the soundscape in the film?

BC: In most films, sound is an afterthought, but on *Rabbit Trap* it was considered in every department, from script to costume to shooting format. A portion of the sound design and music were created before we shot, then played on set to dictate the mood and rhythm of certain scenes. During post-production, our editor, sound designer, and composer exchanged elements back and forth, rather than it being a linear process. Doing this in a more fluid (sometimes circular) way had its own challenges and rewards but overall felt freeing and more collaborative for everyone. It was an exciting and new way to work, and the only way to execute a film like this.

MC: Analogue recording is a constant in 1970s genre TV in Britain – most notably in *The Stone Tape* – so it makes perfect sense that you set your story in the 1970s. Why are we still haunted by the analogue world?

BC: I'm fascinated when technology, art and the paranormal are indistinguishable from each other. And why shouldn't they be? All three are about extending our senses and redefining the limits of reality. They help us reckon with the fundamental weirdness of existing. But analogue technology hits an extra sweet spot compared to digital: analogue technology imprints our inner worlds on the physical world. Inspect a vinyl under a microscope and you see the scars that contain your favourite song. Hold exposed film under a light and you're seeing a chemical imprint of the actual light that bounced off your lover's face. It's evidence that the mind exists.

With *Rabbit Trap*, I wanted to connect this phenomenon with how an event leaves a physical imprint on us, like grooves on a record that gets played and replayed throughout our lives. As Darcy says at one point in the film: "Sound is memory carved into the air. It's a ghost… and when you hear a sound, you become its home. Your body is the house it haunts."

MC: I think *Rabbit Trap* ought to be seen on the big screen, not just because of the outstanding sound design, but because of the emotional experience. The Greeks spoke of catharsis, of how staged tragedy could bring about a sort of death and rebirth for the audience. *Rabbit Trap* feels like this.

BC: Art demands participation: it doesn't do all the work for you. To access its fullest flavour and potential for nourishment, you have to chew on it for a while, then make a choice whether to let it become part of you or spit it out. Going to the cinema requires agency, energy, and a touch of bravery. You make plans, set aside some time, choose an outfit, pay a fee. To access the film, you first need to go on a quest, even if it's a little one like driving to the mall. The small element of chaos that gets introduced simply by leaving home is vital: it opens the door to peril, surprise, and awe. A story that *you show up for* is a story you are already primed to engage with more actively, and that means there's a greater chance it'll nourish you. Steaming services are convenient and cosy, but theatres, galleries, gigs and cinemas are risky and vital: they remind us to be active participants in the art and act of storytelling.

MC: Will you revisit some of these themes in the future?

BC: I'm still fascinated with the intersection of the unconscious and the natural world, so these themes will probably pop up in different forms. I'd love to make a quintessentially British creature feature one day, perhaps involving bogs and psychic badgers. We'll see what bubbles up…

Rabbit Trap is currently on release in UK cinemas.

MARIA J PÉREZ CUERVO is a writer, editor and regular FT contributor. In 2019 she founded HELLEBORE, a small press devoted to folk horror, folklore, magic and the occult in Britain. She recently edited *Tales of Occult Britain* (2025), an anthology of contemporary weird fiction.

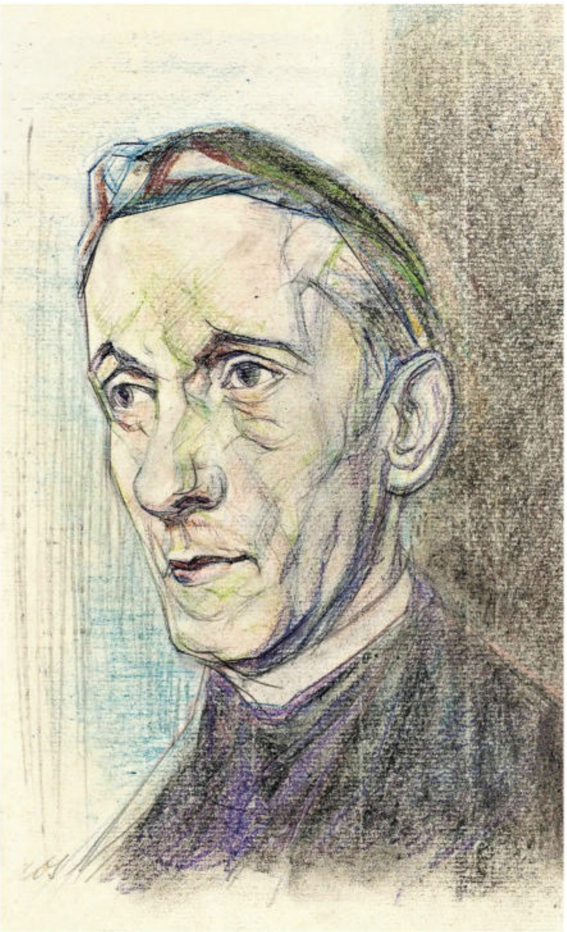
BRYN CHAINEY is a British-Australian filmmaker. His debut feature, *Rabbit Trap*, starring Dev Patel, premiered at Sundance 2025. Aside from directing, he is the co-founder of Pustnik, a non-profit screenwriting residency and youth education programme that takes place annually in remote communities across Romania.

HANNEN SWAFFER

THE SPIRITUALIST POPE OF FLEET STREET

Campaigning tabloid journalist, Socialist firebrand and champion of Spiritualism, Hannen Swaffer was once a household name. CATHI UNSWORTH explores the life and times of one of the most neglected but fascinating figures in the history of the British press.

There can't be a more *Through The Looking Glass* representation of the popular press of nearly a century ago compared to today than the billboards announcing Hannen Swaffer's arrival at the *Daily Herald* in 1931. This newspaper, born of a print workers' labour dispute, was established in 1912 by radical socialists and Trade Unionists intent on publicising the struggles of the working class.[1] By 1922, it had become the official organ of the TUC and the Labour Party, who sold a 51 per cent share to Odham's Press, owners of *The People*, in 1929. By 1933, it had become Britain's' best-selling daily, with net sales of two million,[2] and its most popular writer was a man who was as famous for his interest in Spiritualism as he was for his socialism.



LEFT: A pencil and crayon portrait of Hannen Swaffer by his friend Austin Osman Spare, c. 1944-45.

IMPAINT / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

A working class boy from Kent who came to have the ear of the Establishment, the inventor of the gossip column, champion of Suffragettes, pioneer of photo-journalism who helped to catch the murderer Crippen, and a theatre critic who held nightly court at the Savoy Grill, Hannen Swaffer had also helped to launch *Psychic News*, would go on to become Honorary President of the Spiritualist's National Union (SNU) and to write two volumes of correspondence with his deceased former employer, Lord Northcliffe.[3] A tall, gaunt figure, who dressed like a Victorian undertaker – in his later years, he resembled William Hartnell's original Doctor Who – Swaffer was pictured on these advertisements in trademark black coat and fedora, turning his back to the camera. As he noted at the time: "I'm the only bugger in Fleet Street who sells newspapers with his behind."[4]

Swaffer was so popular throughout the next two decades that when the political journalist Hugh Massingham compiled his 1945 study of working class life in the East End, *I Took Off My Tie*, he reported that: "As far as I could judge, they all read *The Daily Herald*… and the topic of conversation was the article by Mr Swaffer. All of them seemed to admire Mr Swaffer. He wasn't afraid of anybody, they said, and the men remarked how uncomfortable the Capitalists would feel when they read Mr Swaffer over toast and muffins, and eggs and kidneys, and coffee."[5]

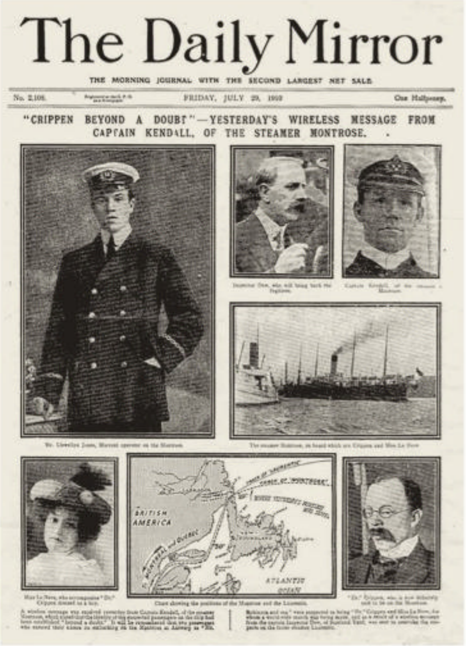
SWAFFER WROTE TWO VOLUMES OF CORRESPONDENCE WITH HIS DECEASED EMPLOYER

In 1942, Swaffer was honoured with a dinner for his 40 years of service to the newspaper industry, where he was dubbed 'The Pope of Fleet Street'. Shortly afterwards, he was amused to receive a cutting from an acquaintance in Tel Aviv that had used a photo of him to illustrate a story on the then real Pope, Pius XII.[6] A decade later, the day before taking up his first Fleet Street post on *The Daily Mirror*, the young Keith Waterhouse recalled eagerly searching the pubs of the vicinity for a glimpse of this talismanic figure taking his lunchtime pint.[7] And yet, all memory of Hannen Swaffer seems to have vanished back into the ether.

THE GHOST OF AN IDEA

Frederick Charles Hannen Swaffer (1879-1962) was the eldest of nine children of a Folkestone draper. A shy youth with a stutter, his future career was inspired by a neighbour, Louis Mongiardino, who worked as a sports writer on Fleet Street. Swaffer went to school in Ramsgate, leaving at 14 with the expectation that he would work to support his family. He first went to a printing firm in Ashford before being apprenticed to a wine merchant at 16. Though this might seem a promising start for a journalist, it was hard, menial work and, to the dismay of his parents, Swaffer escaped at the age of 17 to become a trainee journalist at the *Folkestone Express*. His first job was to report on a piano recital by George Grossmith, the comedian, musician and co-author of *Diary of a Nobody*. It was a glimpse into the world of showbiz that would hold him in thrall for the rest of his days. Swaffer learned his trade rapidly and moved to the *Preston Herald* in 1898.

The 19-year-old Swaffer's first taste of the industrial North was being woken at dawn by the clattering of mill girl's clogs. The poverty he witnessed in Preston went far beyond the privations of his own youth and hearing tales of infants subdued by sugar and gin until their mothers finished their factory



The Daily Mirror

THE MORNING JOURNAL WITH THE SECOND LARGEST NET SALE

No. 2,108. FRIDAY, JULY 29, 1910 One Halfpenny.

"CRIPPEN BEYOND A DOUBT"—YESTERDAY'S WIRELESS MESSAGE FROM CAPTAIN KENDALL, OF THE STEAMER MONTROSE.

BRITISH AMERICA
ATLANTIC OCEAN

HERITAGE IMAGE PARTNERSHIP LTD / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE LEFT: British publisher and politician Lord Northcliffe. **ABOVE CENTRE**: The front page of the *Daily Mirror*, 29 July 1910, announcing the identification of fleeing murderer Dr Crippen. **ABOVE RIGHT**: Medium Gladys Osborne Leonard, who channelled Northcliffe's messages to Swaffer from beyond the grave.

shifts stirred the socialist within. He bought a penny copy of *Merrie England* and horrified his staunchly Tory parents by wearing a red tie on the day of Queen Victoria's funeral.[8]

Swaffer worked hard in Preston, learning all there was to know about running a provincial paper. At night he reviewed shows from the Theatre Royal or Prince's Theatre, ranging from musical comedies to Shakespeare. After a year, he returned home and found work on the *Folkstone Daily News*, owned by flamboyant local councillor Johnny Jones, whom the young Swaffer both idolised and aped, taking to wearing a monocle in homage to his flash patron. But his ambitions lay beyond any provincial beat. Louis Mongiardino was now a sub-editor on the newly founded *Daily Express* and arranged for Swaffer to meet its proprietor, C Arthur Pearson, who was taken with the young man in tall hat, frock coat and spats who stutteringly announced his ambitions to save the world from the misery of poverty after his experiences in the North. Pearson and his bitter enemy, Alfred Harmsworth of *The Daily Mail*, were both intent on tapping into the increasing literacy of the British working class. There was a mass of potential readers out there who favoured the lighter, racier reporting style Swaffer had honed.

Pearson wanted to launch local editions of his paper, and Swaffer was duly dispatched, first to the *North Express* in Crewe and then to the *Midland Express* in Birmingham. But the public did not respond as hoped to these Southern upstarts and before long, a redundant Swaffer was back in Folkestone. He had one final crack at Fleet Street, this time applying to Pearson's rival the *Daily Mail.* In 1902, at the age of 23, his career properly began.

ROOM AT THE TOP

The *Mail*'s office at Carmelite House, 10 Fleet Street, was presided over by Editor Kennedy 'KJ' Jones, a tough, aggressive man, who spoke with an American accent, even though he came from Glasgow, and proprietor Alfred Harmsworth, the future Lord Northcliffe, with whom Swaffer developed a relationship that lasted beyond the grave. Over the coming years, Northcliffe would fly into furies with his protégée – sacking, re-engaging, and then re-sacking him – but he never let anyone else criticise him.

Swaffer worked a year as a reporter on the *Mail* before really proving his worth on the newly launched *Daily Mirror* in 1904. This was the first title on Fleet Street to go fully pictorial, and Swaffer became adept at acquiring record-breaking front cover scoops: the funeral of Edward VII, the sinking of the *Titanic* and, in July 1910, the pursuit and capture of the murderer Hawley Harvey Crippen, who had disappeared after the remains of his wife, Belle Elmore, were discovered at their Camden home.

Swaffer was aware of Elmore as a music hall artiste, and delved into the back pages of the trade magazine *The Performer*, enabling the *Mirror* to publish the first photograph of the murdered woman. He went on to find a picture of the woman who replaced Elmore in her husband's dubious affections, Ethel Le Neve.[9] This, reproduced in the Paris edition of the *Mail*, came to the attention of Captain Kendall of the Atlantic liner *Montrose*, who saw a strong resemblance between her face and that of one of his passengers, a boy sailing with an older male companion. Convinced this was Crippen with a disguised Le Neve, he sent a wireless message to Scotland Yard; Chief Inspector Walter Dew travelled to Quebec on a faster steamer and apprehended the cross-dressing fugitives when the *Montrose* made dock.

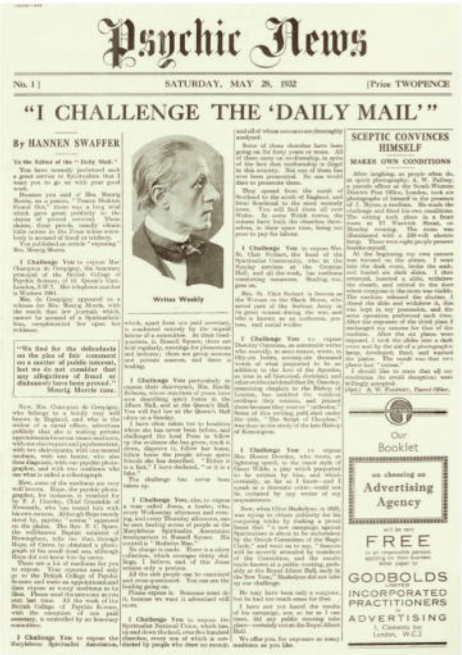
Swaffer came to the end of his tenure on the *Mirror* in 1913, when his lobbying for better rights for his photographers irked Northcliffe into firing him. He was immediately recruited by Edgar Wallace for the rival *Daily Sketch*, and was soon running the place as editor in everything but name. One of his biggest campaigns was for the rights of Suffragettes, and his pictorial recreation of the force-feeding of women prisoners caused a sensation. To Northcliffe's fury, he continually out-scooped the *Mirror*, initiating the first gossip column,[10] which was quickly aped by all its rivals, and expanding coverage of popular entertainments.

In 1914, Northcliffe asked Swaffer to bring his photojournalism expertise back to the *Mail* and, at the outbreak of World War I, he was also given the editorship of the *Weekly Dispatch*. He continued his run of scoops with pictures of the sinking of the *Blücher* and the *Lusitania*, and battle pictures from the frontline. Throughout WWI, Northcliffe fought the censorship of the government on reporting bad news, reserving particular vitriol for Secretary of State for War, Lord Kitchener, for the lack of ammunition provided to soldiers at Galliopoli and Neuve Chapelle. When he demanded the headline "*Kitchener's Tragic Blunder*" be run across the front cover on 21 May 1915, the *Mail* was burned on the Stock Exchange and circulation plummeted. Unrepentant, Northcliffe declared: "I mean to tell the truth however much it costs." He was vindicated once the truth emerged, and sales returned.

OTHER WORLDS

It was the death of Northcliffe on 14 August 1922 that led Swaffer into his voyage to the Great Beyond. Two years after the press baron's demise, leading light of the Spiritualist movement Sir Arthur Conan Doyle claimed to have received messages from Northcliffe, stating he had unfinished business with his private secretary, Louise Owen. Under the author's guidance, Owen met with the medium Mrs Gladys Osborne Leonard at her home in East Barnet, and for two hours conversation was channelled between the worlds.

Swaffer, who was by now editing the *People*,



Psychic News

No. 1] SATURDAY, MAY 28, 1932 [Price TWOPENCE

"I CHALLENGE THE 'DAILY MAIL'"

By HANNEN SWAFFER

Writes Weekly

"We find for the defendants on the plea of fair comment on a matter of public interest, but we do not consider that any allegations of fraud or dishonesty have been proved."
Moorig Morris case.

SCEPTIC CONVINCES HIMSELF

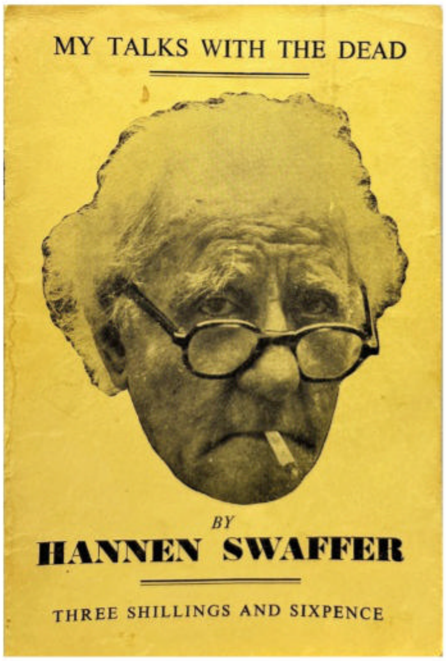
MAKES OWN CONDITIONS

Our Booklet

on choosing an Advertising Agency

will be sent FREE

GODBOLDS LIMITED
INCORPORATED PRACTITIONERS
in
ADVERTISING
1, Clements Inn
London, W.C.2



ABOVE LEFT: A 1932 piece by Swaffer in *Psychic News* challenging the sceptical *Daily Mail* to 'expose' a number of mediums and Spiritualists. **ABOVE CENTRE**: A photo of Swaffer from his book-length 1945 defence of Spiritualism, *My Greatest Story*. **ABOVE RIGHT**: Swaffer, with omnipresent fag, in a 1962 Spiritualist tract.

published the transcript on his front page of 24 September 1924, under the headline "*A Letter Dictated by Northcliffe*". Subjects ranged from how the proprietor's mind had become jumbled towards the end of his days to his bad teeth and irritating cough. He said that he had seen Owen eating figs shortly after he had passed – which she verified.

Though not wholly convinced, Swaffer accompanied Owen to further séances at Mrs Leonard's. At first he failed to connect to his former boss but, at a séance on 6 October 1924 at the house of his friend Dennis Bradley, a trumpet rose into the air and floated over to Swaffer. It called out: "Swaff, Swaff, the Chief… I'm so glad to see you, Swaff!" Swaffer did not recognise the voice as Northcliffe's, but nonetheless felt "a state of ecstatic joyousness" afterwards.[11]

Six days later, he and Dennis Bradley went to Mrs Leonard's cottage, where Northcliffe came through the medium's spirit guide Feda for about an hour and a half. He discussed people employed in his office, an electricity bill that he "had a row about", and three children living in Broadstairs, Kent, where he had a house, of whom he was fond and felt responsible for.

"Before I passed over," he said, "some interfering idiot began trying to make something out of it…"

In *Northcliffe's Return*, Swaffer wrote that his former boss had wanted this story kept from the world "because the world usually believes the worst of men". It wasn't until 1971 that Paul Ferris's biography of the press baron disclosed that he had three children by his mistress, Mrs Geraldine Wrohan, living with her at his second home near Broadstairs.[12] Following this, Swaffer visited a medium called Alfred Vout Peters in Hunter Street, Bloomsbury, where joss-sticks burned and a spirit guide called Moonstone brought through the former British Prime Minister Andrew Bonar Law. "Get me Beaverbrook," he demanded of Swaffer, referring to his old friend, Max Aitken, whom he had ennobled as Lord Beaverbrook.

SWAFFER JOINED CONAN DOYLE ON THE PLATFORM AT EVENTS AT THE ROYAL ALBERT HALL

Beaverbrook, who had taken over the *Daily Express* in 1917 and worked as the Minister for Information during the War, duly obliged, but the experiment was not a success. Bonar Law stayed silent, replaced instead by the first Labour MP Keir Hardie, speaking nine years after his own demise. Beaverbrook asked him if he was still wearing his cloth cap. Hardie replied in the affirmative: "And my red tie."[13] Though the commanding nature of these requests from politicians and press barons no longer able to physically meddle with events might appear to strengthen their veracity, Beaverbrook was not entirely convinced. Still, Swaffer persuaded him to write the foreword for *Northcliffe Returns*.

Swaffer began to speak publicly about Spiritualism, joining Conan Doyle on the platform at events at the Royal Albert Hall and even Wormwood Scrubs prison. He invited PG Wodehouse and other celebrity friends to join him at the Bradley circle, while Northcliffe continued to keep his eye on his rivals from beyond the grave, always referring to the *Express* as "the other paper" and complaining to Swaffer about perceived defects in the *Mail*.

By the 1930s, Swaffer was holding séances at his home in St Martin's Lane, with a circle of trusted friends, including journalist Maurice Barbanell, with whom he conceived the idea of the Spiritualist newspaper *Psychic News*, one night in 1932. Swaffer's neighbours complained of the noise of furniture shifting in his flat at night and spirit friends even seemed to follow him around. The recently departed theatre impresario George Edwards once interrupted a conversation with a friend by knocking on the ceiling. "I shan't be long, George," Swaffer assured him.[14]

HARK THE HERALD

Swaffer joined the *Daily Herald* in 1931, after a period of relative frivolity as the theatre critic on the *Daily Express*. From 1933, when Hitler rose to power, he consistently used his position to warn about the menace of Nazism.

On a 1936 holiday at the Mamounia Hotel in Marrakesh, he encountered two men who shared his unease – former PM David Lloyd George and future PM Winston Churchill. Churchill, virtually the lone Tory voice against Hitler, had read the *Herald*'s disclosure that Germany had spent £1 billion on rearmament during the past three years. He told Swaffer: "That is the first printed confirmation of what I have been saying."[15]

Two days before World War II broke out, Swaffer's brother Geoffrey was killed in a practice blackout, driving his motorbike under a bus. The next day, Swaffer met Churchill in the Savoy and told him the news. "There'll be many more," Churchill grimly assessed.

Swaffer spent the first part of the War covering the Blitz from the poorest parts of London, frequenting the East End nightly in the worst of the raids, and campaigning for deep air raid shelters. He kept his hand in with both socialist and Spiritualist causes, helping his future biographer, the Labour MP Tom Driberg, win his first seat in the 1942 Malden by-election. Then, in March 1944, he appeared as a witness for the Defence at the Old Bailey for surely the strangest trial of the War years, the Prosecution of Scottish medium Helen Duncan for Witchcraft (see panel over page).

After the war, he faced the encroaching privations of old age by encouraging young journalists to follow in his footsteps. He continued to speak publicly into his eighties, still writing for *Psychic News* as well as the *Herald* and the *People*. But he never got over the shock of being evicted from his St Martin's Lane home to make way for a new development in March 1960, nor his subsequent rehousing to the wilds of Clapham Common. He died less than two years later, on 16 January 1962. He had already written his own obituary, published in the *Herald* on 18 January. It opened with the words: "*He was an old bore…*"

Maurice Barbanell continued to edit *Psychic News* until his death in 1981. Like Swaffer with Northcliffe, he kept in touch with his old comrade in the afterlife, telling Tom Driberg that Swaffer's first words from the Other Side were an adaptation of the phrase most often on his lips when he was alive: "I told Him…"

But Swaffer's end was far less ignominious than that of the *Herald* itself. Purchased by IPC, this former socialist beacon was rebranded as *The Sun* in 1964, and, when sales failed to ignite, sold to Rupert Murdoch's News Limited in 1969, ushering in a new era that would have been anathema to Hannen Swaffer.

NOTES

1 Stanley Reynolds *Poor Men's Guardians: A Record of the Struggles for a Democratic Newspaper Press, 1763-1973*, Lawrence and Wishart, 1974.

2 Paul Foot, "How the TUC killed workers paper", *Socialist Worker*, Sept 1973.

3 *Northcliffe's Return*, Psychic Press, 1939, and *My Greatest Story*, WH Allen, 1946.

4, Tom Driberg, *"Swaff": The Life and Times of Hannen Swaffer*, MacDonald and Jane's, 1974.

5 Hugh Massingham, *I Took Off My Tie*, The Cresset Press, 1945.

6 Driberg, op. cit.

7 Keith Waterhouse, *Streets Ahead*, Hodder & Stoughton, 1995.

8 Driberg, op. cit.

9 Ibid.

10 The imaginatively titled 'Mr Gossip', conceived by Swaffer and first written by Philip Page, who traversed nocturnal London in evening dress with a pair of blue silk pyjamas in his coat pocket.

11 Driberg, op. cit.

12 Paul Ferris, *The House of Northcliffe*, Weidenfield and Nicolson, 1971.

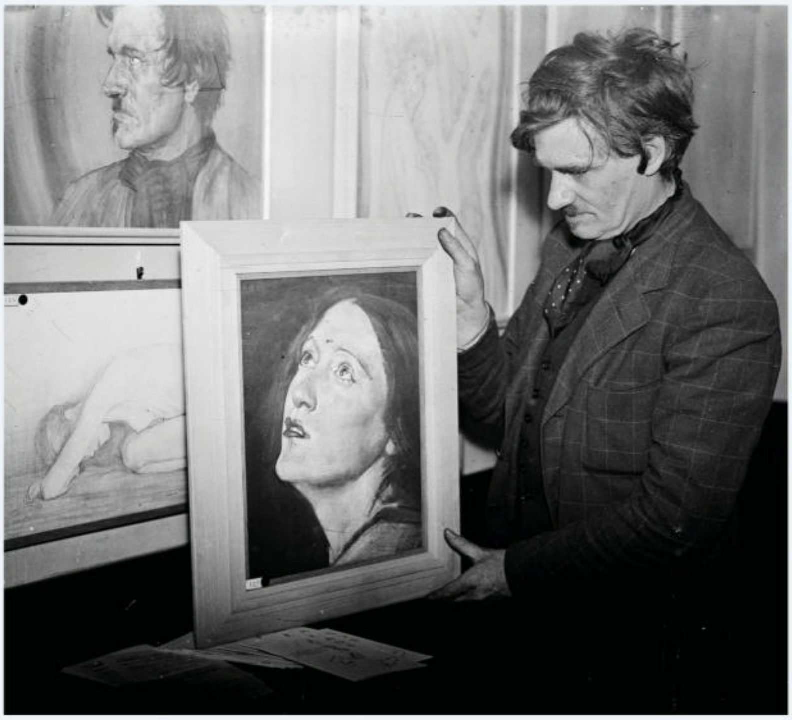
13 Driberg, op. cit.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

CATHI UNSWORTH is the author of six pop-cultural noir novels, including *That Old Black Magic* (which features the Helen Duncan case). She lives in London, and gives frequent talks and walks for The Sohemian Society.

MYSTERY OF AN ARTIST SWAFFER & AUSTIN OSMAN SPARE



SMITH ARCHIVE / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE: Artist and occultist Austin Osman Spare with some of his paintings.

Another of Swaffer's great friends was the artist and occultist Austin Osman Spare (1886-1956; see **FT144:34-40**), of whom he first became aware by chance in 1904, when, as a brilliant youngster, Spare had his first public show in the foyer of the Newington Public Library in Walworth Road, London SE17.

Passing by, Swaffer was struck by the strange name of the artist and stepped inside. "All I can remember of this collection of drawings is their extraordinary rhythm of line and their arresting originality," he recalled. "But the experience, and the artist's name, I never forgot." [1]

They didn't actually meet until 1927, at another Spare show at the St George's Gallery in Hanover Square, London W1. By now Spare had a reputation as a man interested in psychic phenomena and his work had attracted the interest of Swaffer's conduit to the Other Side, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.
In an enthusiastic article for the *Daily Express*, Swaffer introduced Spare as a medium, but that "who or what the communicating force was he did not know".

After that, Swaffer became a frequent visitor to Spare's tenement quarters in 52 Becket House, Tabard Street, Borough, London SE1, where the artist expounded on his methods of working from the subconscious via automatic drawing, claiming to have once produced 50 pages in 24 hours. He told Swaffer his oft-repeated and embroidered-upon tale that, as a child, he had been the pupil of a witch, who read the tarot cards, lived to be 101 and could transform herself from an old hag into a beautiful woman. Swaffer published the results of their conversations in 1929 as *Adventures with Inspiration*.[2]

Despite his genius, but perhaps because he was, like Swaffer, of genuine working class stock and had no rich patrons, Spare lived a life of often bitter poverty. When Becket House was destroyed in the Blitz of 10 May 1941, it took his home, all his possessions and an estimated 300 paintings with it. Fortunately Spare was fire-watching on the night in question, on the roof of a nearby building, but he sustained injuries that damaged his hands as well as his mind. He gradually recovered, eking out the remains of his existence by exhibiting his work in pubs. Swaffer continued to promote Spare's work, receiving paintings by his friend in return. When Spare died penniless in 1956, Swaffer paid for his funeral.

NOTES

1 Phil Baker, *Austin Osman Spare, The Life and Legend of London's Lost Artist,* Strange Attractor Press, 2011.

2 Hannen Swaffer, *Adventures with Inspiration*, Morley and Mitchell Kennerly Junior, 1929. The text of this book, along with Swaffer's article on Spare, "Mystery of an Artist", can be found in *Mystery of an Artist: Austin Osman Spare*, I-H-O Books, 2002.

THE POPE, THE WITCH AND THE GHOST HUNTER

SWAFFER AND THE HELEN DUNCAN AFFAIR

The trial of Helen Duncan (1897-1956) in March 1944 remains controversial. For Spiritualists like Swaffer, it was akin to the persecution of witches that swept the country in the 17th century – and indeed, the Scottish medium was tried on a clause of James I's 1604 legislation that had been imported into Section 4 of the amended 1735 Witchcraft Act. Her real crime, supporters maintain, was that she had brought through sailors from a sunken vessel at a séance in Portsmouth in December 1941, unwittingly breaking the law by acting as a channel for reporting news that had been placed under a government D-Notice forbidding publication.

Did the authorities believe she had used supernatural forces, suspect her of being a spy, or simply want to silence a voice likely to spread panic? Why did three years elapse between this séance and her trial, and why did that take place at the Central Criminal Court, the Old Bailey in London, and not at Portmouth Assizes in the city where she was arrested? These are all questions that have yet to be satisfactorily answered.

It was certainly the case that since 1940 security had been tightened throughout the Home Defence Executive, which coordinated the Home Office, MI5, MI6, the police and Admiralty. All chief constables were instructed to report security news twice a month to their MI5 regional security liaison officer. Rumours, reported in the *Daily Sketch* that year that German agents were attending British séances swirled amid a general atmosphere of secrecy and paranoia about spies and Fifth Columnists. *Psychic News* editor Maurice Barbanell was warned about publishing false information provided by mediums in 1940.[1]

THE MASTERS TEMPLE
ER'S DRUG STO

TRINITY MIRROR / MIRRORPIX / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

As far as the public were concerned, people contacted mediums and attended séances for support and reassurance, as they had done during World War I. But, as hostilities raged on, public dissatisfaction with what they were hearing began to grow, and magistrates around the country started to act on their complaints. A string of prosecutions under the 1824 Vagrancy Act for "pretending or professing to tell fortunes" began in May 1942, with Stella Hughes – the wife of a Hampstead borough councillor – fined £10 plus costs. Three more cases followed in 1943, in Cardiff, Birmingham and Yarmouth on the Isle of Wight.

Helen Duncan had come to Maurice Barbanell's attention a decade before, when she was publicly tested in a series of séances between 1931-32 by the London Spiritualist Alliance (LSA), advised by professional stage magicians and doctors and observed by Barbanell and Swaffer, who wrote them up for *Two Worlds*.[2] These in turn caught the attention of arch sceptic Harry Price, the self-styled Ghost Hunter, who also ran tests on Helen at his National Laboratory for Psychical Research (NLPR) in Roland Gardens, South Kensington. The society ladies who witnessed a handcuffed Helen produce her ectoplasm for the LSA were a great deal more impressed than Price. His 1932 paper "Regurgitation and the Duncan Mediumship" came complete with plates of Helen manifesting what Price, himself an experienced stage magician and member of the Magic Circle, was convinced was a length of cheesecloth, concealed in her stomach to be brought back up when occasion demanded.[3]

HIS NOVELS HAVE LOST NONE OF THEIR POWER TO AMAZE, INSPIRE, HORRIFY AND PERPLEX

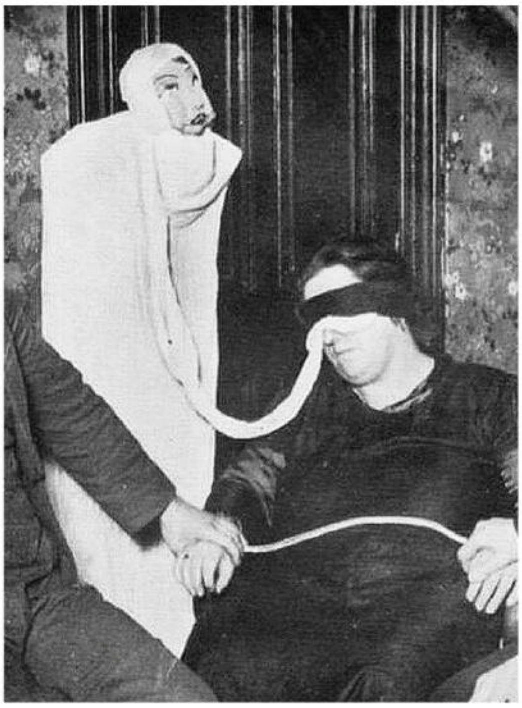
Among those who had witnessed Helen's feats for the LSA was Brigadier Roy Firebrace, head of Military Intelligence in Scotland. Firebrace, who was a Spiritualist, was impressed with what he saw, and in May 1941, attended another private séance in Edinburgh, during which Duncan announced that a great British battleship had been sunk. Firebrace subsequently telephoned the Admiralty and was informed of the terrible fate of *HMS Hood*, split in two in the Denmark Strait on 24 May by the German *Bismarck*, with the loss of all but three of its 1,418 crew. Helen, it seemed, was particularly tuned into the Navy. A few months later, on 2 December 1941, at the Master's Temple Psychic Centre in Portsmouth, she apparently passed on a message from a sailor from the *HMS Barham*, torpedoed by German submarine U-331 in the eastern Mediterranean on 25 November, with 868 killed.

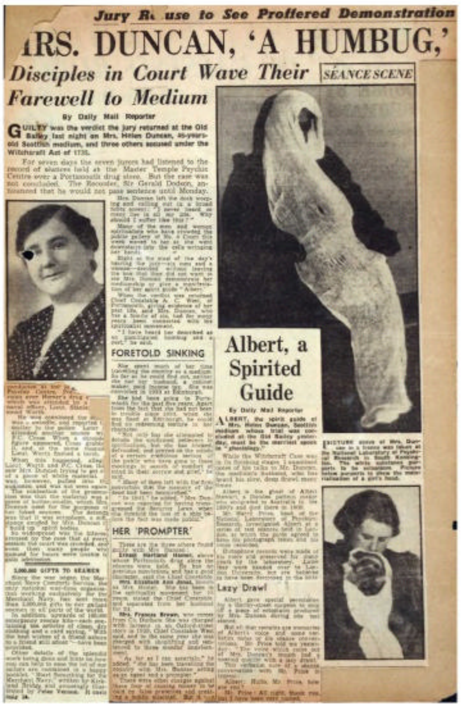
LEFT: The Master's Temple, Church of Spiritual Healing in Portsmouth. **BELOW**: Helen Duncan.

Did Firebrace have something to do with Helen's subsequent prosecution? Officially, she only started to be investigated in December 1943, by Portsmouth constabulary's Detective Inspector Frederick Ford. He had received complaints about the Master's Temple, run by chemist Edward Homer and his wife Elizabeth, from the rooms above their chemists shop on Copnor Road. Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve (RNVR) Lieutenant Stanley Worth, concerned that his mother was being conned, attended several services there. The chemist's wife told him that an amazing medium called Helen Duncan would be visiting in the New Year, and that tickets, already highly priced, would be at a premium.

Worth and his friend Surgeon Lieutenant Elijah Fowler came back to the Master's Temple on 14 January 1944. Before they were allowed into the room, their blackout torches were taken from them and they were given their assigned seats – which could be construed as ruses used by stage magicians to prepare 'marks' in the audience. Once a hymn had been sung, Helen began her contact with the other side, sitting in a curtained cabinet in the centre of the dimly lit room. She conjured up a form that she told Worth was his Aunt, recently deceased from bowel trouble. Knowing that all his aunts were in rude health, Worth's next visit was to Portsmouth Police Station, where he was interviewed by DI Ford.

Worth returned for Helen's next sitting the following day, carrying a concealed torch, with another friend, War Reserve Constable Rupert Cross. While DI Ford waited outside, the Reservists waited for Helen to





Jury R use to See Proffered Demonstration

MRS. DUNCAN, 'A HUMBUG,'

Disciples in Court Wave Their Farewell to Medium

By Daily Mail Reporter

GUILTY was the verdict the jury returned at the Old Bailey last night on Mrs. Helen Duncan, 46-years-old Scottish medium, and three others accused under the Witchcraft Act of 1735.

For seven days the seven jurors had listened to the record of séances held at the Master Temple Psychic Centre over a Portsmouth drug store. But the case was not concluded. The Recorder, Sir Gerald Dodson, announced that he would not pass sentence until Monday.

FORETOLD SINKING

HER 'PROMPTER'

SÉANCE SCENE

Albert, a Spirited Guide

By Daily Mail Reporter

Lazy Drawl

ABOVE LEFT: Helen Duncan producing some less than convincing ectoplasm. **ABOVE RIGHT**: The guilty verdict in the Duncan trial as reported by the *Daily Mail* on 1 April 1944.

begin her manifestations before Cross threw open the curtains of the cabinet and Worth pointed a torch at the medium, revealing Helen pushing away yards of white fabric. He blew a whistle, the cue for Ford to come in and arrest Helen on suspicion of contravening the Vagrancy Act by "pretending to hold communication with the spirits of deceased persons". She was taken to Kingston Cross Police Station and cautioned, then put before the magistrate the next morning without representation and remanded in custody at Holloway prison until 25 January.

During 1943 and 1944 Hannen Swaffer had been campaigning on behalf of those mediums arrested and charged under the Vagrancy Act. Together with Barbanell, Percy Wilson, President of the SNU London District Council, and the Spiritualist barrister Charles Loseby KC, he also had lobbied Home Secretary Herbert Morrison to have Spiritualism recognised as an official religion. The SNU deputation voiced their concerns about the increasing use of the Vagrancy Act to prosecute mediums and Morrison promised to look into it.

Now, Percy Wilson made hasty arrangements for Loseby to represent Helen at her next hearing. Police at Porstmouth Magistrates Court were surprised to see a barrister come to Helen's aid, still more by his argument that by denying Helen bail and representation at her arrest they had presented her as a dangerous criminal, out of line with the Home Secretary's wish that the Vagrancy Act be suspended. Helen was released and another hearing timetabled for 8 February.

Ford submitted a report to the Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP), Sir Edward Tindal, in which information was amassed to support the case against her, including Harry Price's paper and photographs.[4] Tindal's assistant, Arthur Sefton-Cohen, met with Ford and concluded that a charge of conspiracy to defraud would be preferable, as this would lead to a jury trial and, in the event of a conviction, a custodial sentence. Helen was read this new charge on the morning of 8 February and promptly fainted. Fresh summons were issued to the Homers and served on them that afternoon. The court was adjourned and a new date set for 29 February.

After the accused pleaded not guilty, a trial was set to take place at the Old Bailey. The barristers and Home Office framed an indictment, which was found in Section 4 of the Witchcraft Act: "…the more effectual preventing and punishing any pretences to such arts and powers". So all the Prosecution needed to prove was that Helen had pretended to conjure up the dead.

The trial began on 23 March 1944 in the Blitz-damaged Old Bailey. The public gallery had been bombed out of use, but eager spectators crammed into corridors and precincts and there was a distinctly showbiz dazzle to the proceedings. The DPP's representative, JE Robey was the son of George Robey, Britain's best-loved comedian. The presiding Recorder of London, Sir Gerald Dodson, had a sideline writing light musical comedies, one of which, *The Rebel Maid,* had its Drury Lane premiere midway through the trial. And the Prosecuting KC John Maude was the dashing son of a well-known actor.

For Helen's Defence, the less glamorous Loseby, a 62-year old who spoke in a voice made husky by a gas attack suffered in the trenches of WWI, had mustered over 50 witnesses who could testify to the medium's veracity. These included high-ranking military men, noted scientists, society ladies – and, of course, Swaffer.

On 28 March, Swaffer proved one of the most eloquent and amusing witnesses. His testimony detailed the test conditions Helen had passed for the LSA in 1932 and mocked the Recorder's parallel career in musicals – some of which he had suffered through in his role as a theatre critic. He suggested that by pursuing Mrs Duncan under a 200-year-old law, "This entire hearing is evidence that the orthodoxy has gone back to broomsticks… The Establishment has turned to rekindling one of the great amusements of the Dark Ages – the persecution of women."[5]

The Recorder got his own back by neither giving Swaffer the chance to share his evidence of Helen's previous tests, nor allowing his attempts at swallowing and regurgitating cheesecloth – which he had helpfully brought along in the absence of the material found on Helen in Portsmouth actually being provided as evidence for the jury.

The trial closed on 29 March, and when the summing-up came the next day, Robey's devastating performance did for the unfortunate Loseby, whose vast accumulation of witnesses and lengthy cross-examinations had been ridiculed by the Prosecution to make him appear dithering and bewildered throughout. Helen Duncan and her co-defendants were all found guilty, but due to their previous good behaviour, her Portsmouth hosts the Homers had their sentences suspended. Helen faced the return trip to Holloway alone, to serve 10 months imprisonment.

For more on the Helen Duncan case, see **FT116:40-43, 372:38-45, 445:20-21**.

NOTES

1 Malcolm Gaskill, *Hellish Nell: Last of Britain's Witches*, Fourth Estate, 2001.

2 *Ibid*. These included Helen being tied up with 40 yards of sashcord, clamped with regulation police issue handcuffs and having her thumbs tied together with eight yards of thread, from which she managed to undo herself in less than three minutes.

3 Price's pictures of Helen from the séance room of the NLPR are at www.harrypricewebsite.co.uk/Seance/Duncan/duncan-intro.htm

4 Although the Ghost Hunter declined to appear for the Prosecution, citing ill health, he would make one appearance on the Prosecution benches at the Old Bailey on 28 March, the same day that Swaffer appeared for the Defence.

5 *Guardian*, 30 March 1944.

BABA'S BLACK SHEEP

As Venezuelan dictator Nicolas Maduro is bundled into a helicopter and flown away into US custody, **SD TUCKER** re-examines his alleged links to Indian god-men, voodoo cults, and even Satan himself. Was Maduro Saint Nick or Old Nick?

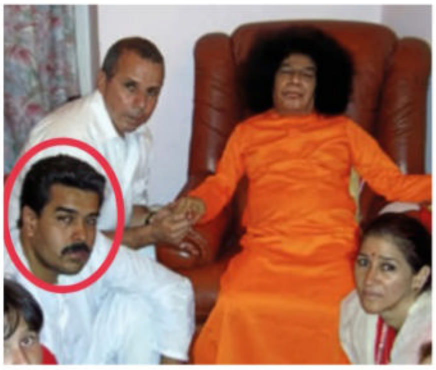
ASSOCIATED PRESS / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

LEFT: Nicolas Maduro on the campaign trail in Caracas in 2024. **BELOW:** And sitting at the feet of the elderly guru Sai Baba in a 2005 photograph.

Sai Baba, as long-term readers of *FT* may recall from previous coverage of the man and his miracles in these very pages (see **FT276:28-29**), was a fuzzy, Afro-headed, saffron-clad Indian guru with many magical powers, from the ability to materialise expensive watches from thin air to the capacity to teleport and bilocate. My favourite Sai Baba story was of the follower who cracked his lunchtime coconut open one day, before a miniature version of Baba's disembodied head paranormally floated up out of it. Imagine if you opened a Kinder Egg capsule or packet of crisps and something similar happened; it's no wonder Baba had so many thousands of eager followers across the world, including in Venezuela, where his cult was introduced in the 1970s by a Western acolyte named Arlette Meyer. In 1974, Meyer opened Venezuela's first ever Baba cult centre in the capital city of Caracas. Initially, only seven people attended meetings (eight, if you include Baba's astrally projected soul), but gradually attendance grew, as ever more Baba-related wonders began occurring across the nation. Once, when a passenger plane was about to crash off the coast, Baba appeared from nowhere in the cockpit and saved the day. Another time, a follower asked her Master via prayer why it was taking so long to sell her house; immediately, a random stranger pulled up in his car and asked if she happened to know of any nice homes for sale in the neighbourhood. Pulled in by the magic, disciples stayed for more mundane good works: Baba's charities also provided free medical operations for Venezuela's poor. But, in the avowedly socialist and welfare-statist society that Venezuela was about to become, following the quasi-Marxist 'Bolivarian Revolution' of 1999, led by charismatic Far-Left military man Hugo Chavez, should such generosity really have been necessary?

Sadly it *was* necessary, because the socialists utterly ruined the oil-rich nation's economy. As such, courting Sai Baba became a useful thing for the Venezuelan junta to do, as Baba's kind disciples, who included foreign surgeons and doctors, were often able to get them off the hook for their own failings with regard to public healthcare provision. Several members of the ruling regime became Sai Baba devotees themselves, including the country's one-time Education Minister and his wife, who gave special permission for Baba's Sai Institute of Human Values to help train the country's teachers, thereby spreading the swami's teachings to impressionable children in the classroom.[1] Baba's most notable supporter was Nicolas Maduro, who took over as Venezuela's quasi-military leader following Hugo Chavez's death from cancer in 2013.

SEVERAL MEMBERS OF THE RULING REGIME WERE SAI BABA DEVOTEES



Introduced into Baba's cult by his wife Cilia Flores while still Chavez's Foreign Minister, Maduro visited the then-elderly guru at his ashram in India in 2005, being granted a private audience before being photographed sitting at his feet like a true submissive. Once Maduro became President, he hung a large, framed portrait of Baba in pride of place in his private office, besides giving the swami's organisations rare leeway to operate freely in a nation where many NGOs were banned as being mere disguised fronts for Western moral imperialism. Flores, like her husband Nicolas, was raised a devout Catholic, but embraced various New Age creeds whilst a student, combining them syncretically with the preachings of Karl Marx, seeing in Baba's Hindu-influenced teachings about karma a guarantee that greedy capitalists and "imperialist Pharisees" would one day get their comeuppance when reincarnated as dung-beetles. When her nephews were arrested by US forces for drug-trafficking in 2015, Flores claimed the events were inspired by Satan, and invoked the Kabbala as a means of spiritual resistance (despite being raised a Catholic, her husband has ancestral Jewish roots).

In 2011, when Baba finally died, aged 84, Maduro used his influence to declare a national day of mourning and have an official proclamation read out in Venezuela's National Congress building, denying that this "great soul of India" and "being of light" had truly died at all, referring only

ASSOCIATED PRESS / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE: Sai Baba communes with his fuzzy-haired self on a giant screen. He could also make his disembodied head appear out of a coconut according to some accounts. **BELOW:** Current acting President of Venezuela, Delcy Rodriguez, is a cult-member too.

to his temporary "physical disappearance" from this Earth-plane, a pretence which some of the more obsessive Chavistas also maintain about their own dear momentarily departed *El Commandante* (see **FT312:42-47, FT317:53, 320:54-55**). Now Nicolas Maduro has experienced a "physical disappearance" of his own from Venezuela, kidnapped by Donald Trump and the US military in early January, and spirited away to a detention centre in New York; behind bars, Maduro must be wishing he possessed the ability to bilocate too, just like his holy hero. Despite this fate, however, Venezuela still remains under the full control of Baba-botherers; the current acting Chavista President, Delcy Rodriguez, is a cult-member too, eagerly exploiting any and all governmental trips to India for international summits as a handy excuse to visit Sai's ashram and pay her respects to his watching ghost.[2]

RING OF TRUTH

Sai Baba was a controversial character, accused of the sexual abuse and financial fleecing of gullible Western worshippers, whose reported ability to produce items like luxury watches from up his bum, or to vomit up golden eggs from his mouth, were put down by critics to prestidigitation and sleight-of-hand, not genuine wonder-working. Nicolas Maduro begged to differ, treasuring one particular enchanted object Baba apported for him during their 2005 ashram meeting as a magical charm able to ward off all harm from America – until Trump finally got him, anyway. Ever since his sacred audience, Maduro had worn a green ring on one of his fingers, the significance of which was revealed by investigative author David Placer, author of two books exploring the occult connections of Venezuela's Bolivarian regime, *The Witches of Chavez* and *The Dictator and the Demons*. According to Placer, when in Baba's presence, Maduro asked only for an apported ring with a red gem in it. Baba refused to materialise such a thing, however, saying red was the colour of evil and violence; instead, Baba spewed up a ring with a green jewel in it, this being the colour of goodness and peace. Prophetically for such a violent and murderous man, the ring did not initially fit Maduro's finger, but he soon ordered it be bent into the correct shape by his underlings, much as he did with all those political opponents tortured inside his prisons. Cynics may say the true reason Baba wanted to give his visitor a green ring was simply because he didn't have a red one already concealed within his robes, throat or anus to conjure up via trickery.[3]

Being very much mix-and-match with his faiths – a little bit of Marxism here, some Kabbala there, a pinch of Catholicism, etc – rumours about Maduro simultaneously being an adherent of far darker creeds like voodoo and Satanism also abound. One strange online account makes a long series of accusations, including the idea the dictator thought he was the reincarnation of Zeus, that he had a favourite general who used to go into trances and speak with the spirit-voice of Hugo Chavez during séances, and that he gave excessive credence to the prophecies of native South American shamans. One regime lackey, it is said, attended a shamanic rite in which the priest took hallucinogens, before the spirits of the three Greek Moiras, or Fates, appeared, spinning the thread of Zeus/Maduro's life, measuring out its length, then cutting it with the scissors of death. They said he would inevitably be overthrown by treason (which has been rumoured as one reason why Trump was able to successfully capture him), unless he saw sense and stood down of his own accord when the Americans were offering him a way out to a life of exile abroad. But Maduro refused, sending to India for one of Sai Baba's chief monks to fly in and interpret the prediction for him in a more auspicious fashion. Sadly for him, Sai's monk confirmed that Fate was indeed inescapable: not that Maduro listened.

Unable to accept defeat, Maduro instead sought to invoke the spirit of the native voodoo-type goddess Queen Maria Lionza, having her statue removed from its traditional position in Caracas to Lionza's sacred mountain of Sorte to win her good will. But this didn't work either. Although the statue was genuinely relocated, allegedly at the deity's specific behest, which regime bureaucrats said excused their lack of legal planning permission, a possessed voodoo priest told Maduro's officials that she did not accept his offering. Instead of building her a nice new statue on Lionza's mountain, he had just had her old one delivered there on the cheap, angering her. Thus, the possessed voodooist drew a dismembered human corpse on the ground using white powder, and dropped red candle-wax all over it for blood; this would be Maduro's ultimate fate, to be torn apart and never put back together again, like a Marxist Humpty-Dumpty. Given this forecast, it seems Nicolas actually got off rather lightly being abducted by Trump – unless, of course, the Donald ultimately intends to hang, draw and quarter him.[4]

MINISTERIO DE RELACIONES EXTERIORES, URUGUAY

ALICOLMENARES / CREATIVE COMMONS

KEVIN PAYRAVI / CREATIVE COMMONS

LEFT: Statues in the Sorte mountains of the Venezuelan folk saints known as "the three powers"– Maria Lionza, Cacique Guaicaipuro and Negro Felipe. **ABOVE:** Venezuelan opposition leader Maria Corina Machado, accused by Maduro of being in a Satanic pact with the US.

MONEY IS THE ROOT OF ALL EVIL

It must be said that the above account seems to be written by a regime opponent in possible exile in the United States; hardly an unbiased account, and there is no guarantee any of it is true. It could simply be propaganda, aimed at giving superstitious native Venezuelans hope their brutal oppressor would one day flee, or else simply trying to blacken his name by association with voodoo, portraying him as so evil he was even rejected by its demons and spirits, which is how most pious Catholic Venezuelans would automatically be primed to perceive them. Already, in 2018, when Maduro had launched a dodgy new petrodollar-linked national cryptocurrency called the 'Petro', viral online rumours had spread that Petro was the name of a wicked voodoo god linked to "The Order of the Black Snake", and that ordinary physical Venezuelan banknotes also had occult symbols like skulls hidden in their designs, placing the entire economy under a communist curse. In actuality, in Haiti, the original home of voodoo, 'petro' is simply the word for a drum used to induce ritual trances at voodoo ceremonies, most notably during the island's old war against French slavery; the whole rumour was just a linguistic misunderstanding, possibly a deliberate one, designed by regime opponents.[5]

But, if this is so, then Nicolas Maduro could not reasonably complain about the spreading of such politically motivated lies: after all, he was guilty of precisely the same sin against his own adversaries. In 2024, following the loss of elections that he falsely claimed to have actually won, Maduro spoke in an interview of how misguided opposition voters had been influenced online by the "fascist" X/Twitter owner Elon Musk, who was engaged in a "Satanic pact" not only with the Devil, but also with the Nobel Prize-winning Venezuelan opposition leader Maria Corina Machado, whom he said was an old witch. Specifically, he said Machado was an incarnation of 'La Sayona', a phantom hitch-hiker from Venezuelan myth, who gets into a cheating husband's car looking like a beautiful young woman, before her face suddenly morphs into a hideous skull filled with giant teeth and she eats him. Previously, Chavistas had called Machado 'La Sayona' as a jokey slur, but now Maduro seemed to be using the name more literally, accusing her of wearing a witchcraft medallion on the campaign trail. Her ally Musk had been seen with Satanic symbols across his chest, he ranted, and, by casting Twitter-spells on the misguided Venezuelan electorate (in cahoots with the alleged Nazi leader of Argentina, Javier Milei), the Far-Right witches and wizards were only copying an earlier black magic propaganda template laid out for them by Benito Mussolini in the 1930s.

Opposition parties were part of a pact with something called "The Satanic Church of Detroit", Maduro continued, meaning they were all controlled by the Greatest Satan of them all: the capitalist, imperialist, racist, warmongering United States. As Maduro warned his electorate: "Look, compatriots, we are facing some demons. When I say we are facing some demons, I am not exaggerating. They have a Satanic pact with the Satanic Church of the United States. La Sayona puts on a medallion and some strange things because she has a pact with Elon Musk and the Satanic Church of Detroit. That's why I say we are facing a Satanic Goliath." In response, the actual US Church of Satan, Detroit-based or otherwise, gave a simple, one-word reply: "Stupid." But as they did so on Twitter, which Maduro said was owned by a known Nazi Satanist, should they really have been believed?[6]

Sitting in his New York prison cell, awaiting lengthy trial at Yankee imperialist hands, Senor Maduro certainly now has a lot to meditate upon. Good job he's such a committed follower of Sai Baba, then.

NOTES

1 www.sathyasai.org/organize/countryintros/venezuela.html

2 www.wionews.com/photos/-follower-of-an-indian-baba-why-venezuela-s-captured-dictator-nicholas-maduro-worshiped-sathya-sai-baba-1767437017012/1767437017014; https://theprint.in/world/after-maduro-venezuelas-delcy-rodriguez-too-has-sathya-sai-link-visited-puttaparthi-at-least-thrice/2819705/; www.oneindia.com/international/how-venezuela-s-nicolas-maduro-became-a-devotee-of-indian-guru-sathya-sai-baba-011-7959622.html; www.sathyasai.org/swamimahasamadhi/venezuela.html; www.bbntimes.com/politics/who-is-cilia-flores-the-wife-of-nicolas-maduro

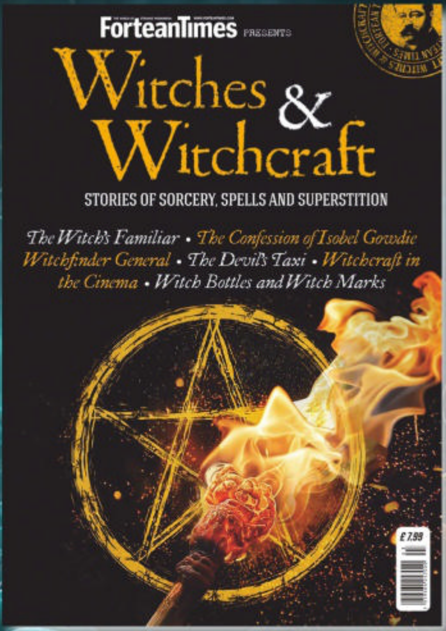
3 www.elmundo.es/cronica/2025/01/02/676e8e57e9cf4a364c8b45a8.html

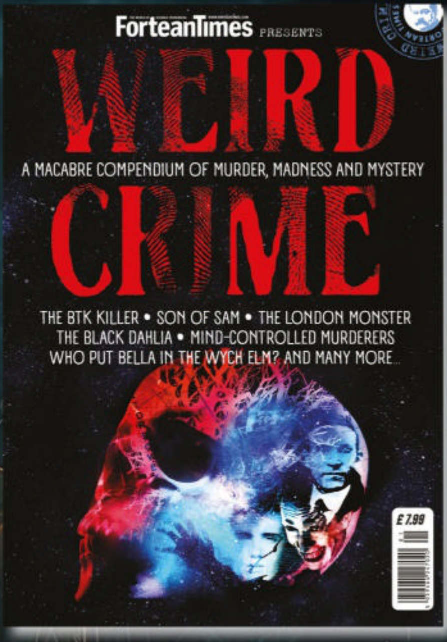
4 www.meer.com/en/71668-shadows-in-the-sunset; https://www.meer.com/en/81650-the-oracle-of-the-great-mamerto; https://www.meer.com/en/authors/1087-jose-gabriel-carrasco-ramirez

5 https://venezuelanalysis.com/analysis/14662/; www.caracaschronicles.com/2018/02/13/haitian-voodoo-petro-case-haitian-perspective/; www.wired.com/story/venezuela-petro-cryptocurrency-bolivar-scam/

6 https://en.cibercuba.com/noticias/2024-08-19-u207888-e207888-s27061-nid287104-maduro-afirma-maria-corina-machado-tiene-pacto#google_vignette; www.agenzianova.com/en/news/Venezuela-Maduro-Musk-and-the-opposition-are-linked-by-Mussolini%27s-satanic-pact/; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sayona

THE WORLD OF FortеanTimes STRANGE PHENOMENA


ForteanTimes PRESENTS
Witches & Witchcraft
STORIES OF SORCERY, SPELLS AND SUPERSTITION
The Witch's Familiar • The Confession of Isobel Gowdie
Witchfinder General • The Devil's Taxi • Witchcraft in the Cinema • Witch Bottles and Witch Marks
£7.99


ForteanTimes PRESENTS
WEIRD
A MACABRE COMPENDIUM OF MURDER, MADNESS AND MYSTERY
CRIME
THE BTK KILLER • SON OF SAM • THE LONDON MONSTER
THE BLACK DAHLIA • MIND-CONTROLLED MURDERERS
WHO PUT BELLA IN THE WYCH ELM? AND MANY MORE
£7.99

ForteanTimes PRESENTS
POLTERGEIST!
THE TRUE STORIES BEHIND THE WORLD'S MOST TERRIFYING HAUNTINGS
PLUS UPDATES AND ANALYSIS FROM GHOST EXPERT ALAN MURDIE
NIGHTMARE ON GREEN STREET
REVISITING THE ENFIELD POLTERGEIST CASE
GHOST IN THE MACHINE
HAUNTED COMPUTERS AND THE VERTICAL PLANE
HOODED HORRORS
THE BLACK MONK OF PONTEFRACT
£7.49

ForteanTimes PRESENTS
MONSTER HUNTERS
IN SEARCH OF UNKNOWN ANIMALS
DINOSAUR SURVIVORS
THE HUNT FOR AFRICA'S MOKELE-MBEMBE
BIGFOOT & BEYOND
ELUSIVE APE-MEN FROM AUSTRALIA TO TAJIKISTAN
MONGOLIAN DEATH WORM
THE POISON-SPITTING ELECTRIC TERROR OF THE GOBI DESERT
IT CAME FROM THE SWAMP!
SOUTH CAROLINA'S CAR-MUNCHING LIZARD MAN
+ ANALYSIS & UPDATES FROM CRYPTOZOOLOGIST DR KARL SHUKER
£6.99

ForteanTimes PRESENTS
GHOSTS & HAUNTINGS
SPECTRES, SPOOKS AND RESTLESS SPIRITS
UNLOCKING THE CAGE
INVESTIGATING THE MOST HAUNTED HOUSE IN ENGLAND
PHANTOM HITCHHIKERS
TERRIFYING ENCOUNTERS ON BRITAIN'S ROADS
HAUNTED THEATRE
THE DOUGHNUT EATING POLTERGEIST OF ALBUQUERQUE
SPURIOUS SPIRITS
THE STRANGE WORLD OF VICTORIAN GHOST IMPERSONATORS
£6.99

ForteanTimes PRESENTS
THE UFO FILES
CLASSIC CASES, NEW DISCOVERIES AND GOVERNMENT COVER-UPS
INVASION 1967
HOW A WAVE OF UFO LANDINGS STUNNED THE BRITISH NATION
ALIENS IN AZTEC
DID A SAUCER CRASH TO EARTH IN THE NEW MEXICO DESERT
BRITAIN'S ROSWELL
INVESTIGATING THE RENDLESHAM FOREST UFO INCIDENT
50 SHADES OF GREY
THE HIDDEN HISTORY OF EXTRATERRESTRIAL SEX EXPERIMENTS
PLUS UPDATES AND ANALYSIS FROM UFO EXPERTS JENNY RANDLES & NIGEL WATSON
£7.49

FORTEAN TIMES SPECIALS, ORDER ONLINE AT:
shop.forteantimes.com

Weight loss: a word of ‘worming’

Trying to shed a few pounds after overdoing it at Christmas? **MARK GREENER** advises against the use of tapeworms for dieting purposes.

This will make you squirm. The “tail end” of a fish tapeworm that infects the intestines of about 20 million people worldwide “often protrudes from the anus of a patient to cause an alarming surprise,” one paper comments in a masterpiece of understatement.[1]

Beef tapeworms that reside in the human gut can be more than 10 metres long. Segments break off, which the person passes in their fæces. Each beef tapeworm segment holds some 10,000 eggs.[2] The brain of one girl from New Guinea contained thousands of cysts harbouring young, live pork tapeworms.[3]

So, at first sight, it seems unlikely that people would deliberately swallow tapeworms to lose weight. Yet quacks and, more recently, Internet sites have sold tapeworms to help weight loss for more than 100 years.[4] Tapeworms may have also contributed to the emaciated appearance of one of the most remarkable ‘freaks’ ever exhibited: Claude Ambroise Seurat, the ‘Living Skeleton’.[5]

Seurat was born in Troyes, Champagne, France on 10 April 1797. At birth, he seemed normal, but during childhood his “frame gradually wasted away”. By his 14th birthday, he had “dwindled away to the skeleton form”. At 28 years of age, he was 5 feet 7 inches tall (170cm) and weighed 78lb (35.5 kg). Less than three inches separated the front of Seurat’s thorax from his back.

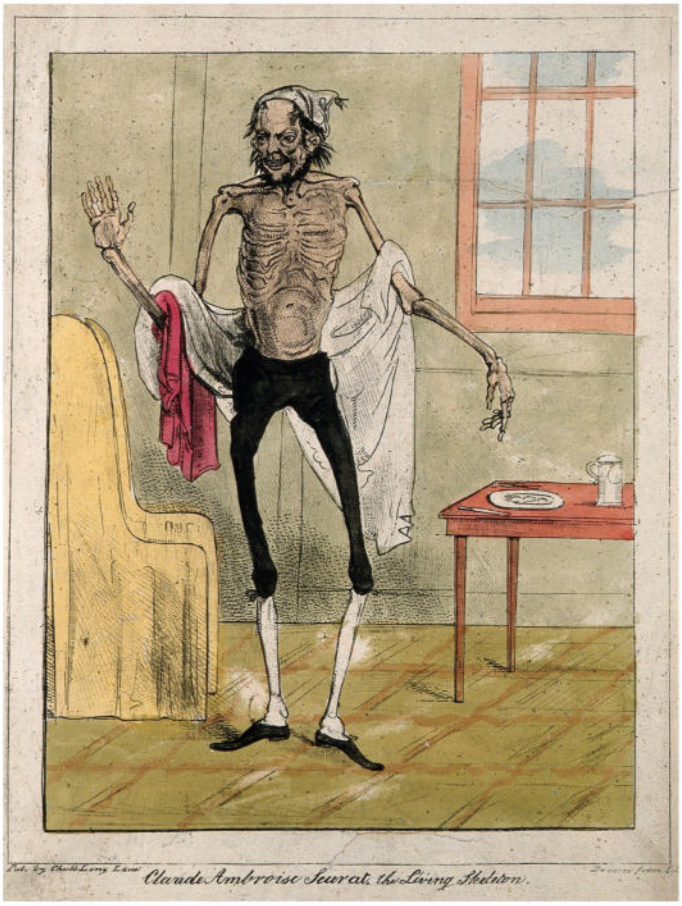
In those days, gaping at human anomalies provided an entertaining day out, and Seurat became a celebrity. In Rouen, 1,500 people saw him on one day. Despite a half-a-crown entrance fee, in the summer of 1825 Londoners flocked to see the ‘Living Skeleton’ at the Chinese Saloon in Pall Mall.

Not everyone welcomed the show, however. The medical journal *The Lancet* lamented the public’s “rabid curiosity” and objected to “one of the most impudent and disgusting attempts to make a profit from the public appetite for novelty, by an indecent exposure of human suffering and degradation, which we have ever witnessed!”.

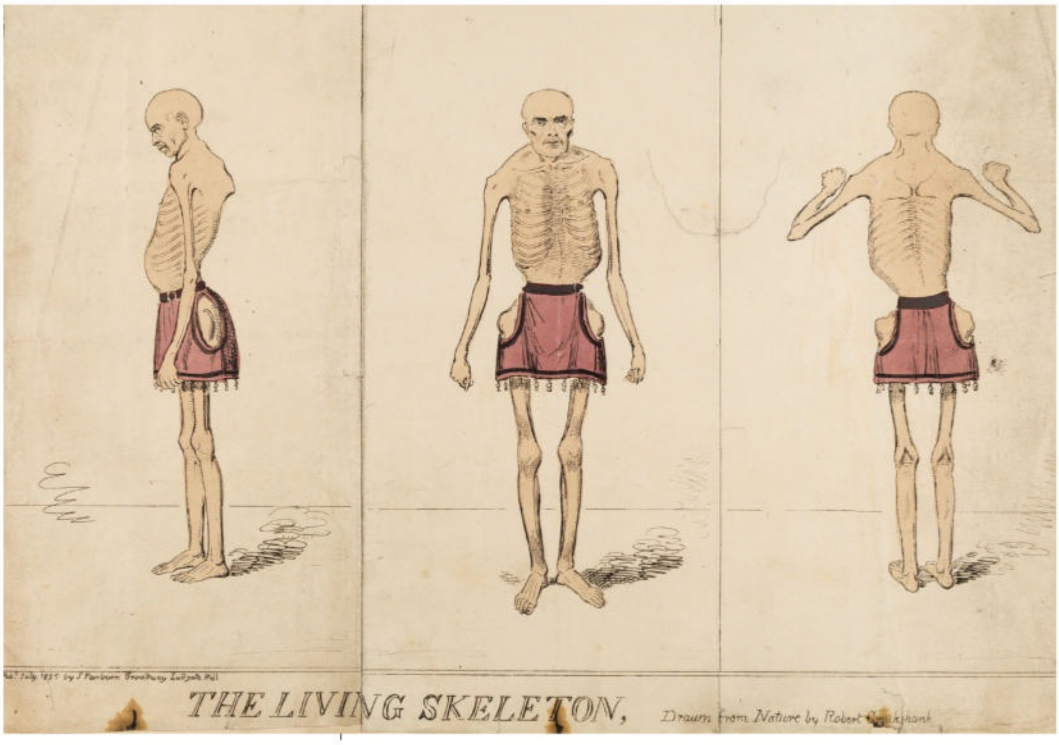
In some ways, little has changed. The “rabid curiosity” evoked by yesteryear’s freakshow has migrated to today’s ‘documentaries’, such as those featuring morbid obesity, on streaming services. These combine a supposed “voyeuristic appeal” with “sympathetic images”. Nevertheless, the historian Professor Gary Cross notes: “The audience is to cheer [the obese] on … like the freak show crowd of old, aghast at their bodies.”[6]

Seurat probably had a rare

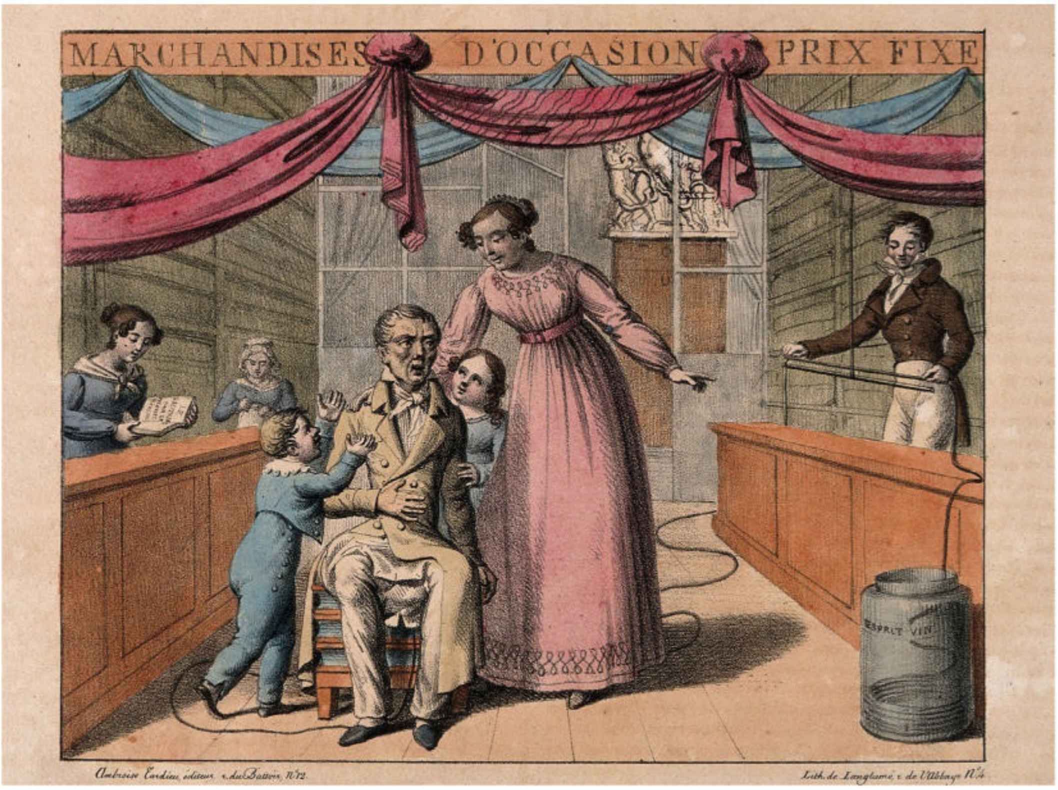
LEFT: Claude Ambroise Seurat, the Living Skeleton in an early 19th century coloured etching. **BELOW**: “The Living Skeleton, Drawn from Nature by Robert Cruikshank”, 1825.


Claude Ambroise Seurat, the Living Skeleton.

WELLCOME COLLECTION


THE LIVING SKELETON,
Drawn from Nature by Robert Cruikshank

WELLCOME COLLECTION


MARCHANDISES D'OCCASION PRIX FIXE
ESPRIT VIN
Ambroise Tardieu, éditeur, r. du Battoir, N.12.
Lith. de Langlumé, r. de l'Abbaye N.4.

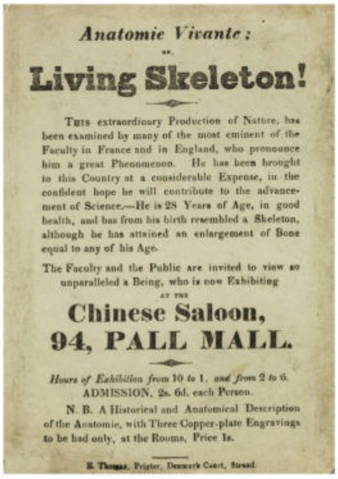
WELLCOME COLLECTION

LEFT: A long parasitical worm (tapeworm) is extracted from an emaciated man in a coloured lithograph of 1823. **BELOW**: The public are invited to view the Living Skeleton at the Chinese Saloon in London.

developmental condition that caused his severe skeletal abnormalities and displaced his heart. But which condition is not clear: post-mortem diagnoses are notoriously unreliable.[7] Nevertheless, the abnormalities caused Seurat swallowing problems. So, he chewed food thoroughly, ate small pieces and drank cautiously to avoid suffocation. His daily food intake was a "penny French roll" or other food totalling only 2-3 ounces (about 70g) a day.

Some sources recount that when Seurat died in 1833, doctors discovered a five-metre (16ft) long tapeworm in his gut. That is relatively petite for a tapeworm. The fish tapeworm that dangles from the patient's anus can reach 12 metres (39ft) long, for example. The tapeworm was not responsible for transforming Seurat into a 'Living Skeleton'. But given his sparse diet, emaciation and likely malnutrition, the tapeworm potentially contributed to his appearance and may have hastened his demise.

After all, tapeworms can, depending on the species, cause nausea and vomiting, exacerbate malnutrition and anæmia, and even trigger potentially fatal seizures. Yet for more than a century, people have popped pills containing tapeworms to lose weight. (Don't try this at home. Really don't.) The pills usually contain immature beef tapeworms. Tapeworms attach to the gut wall using, depending on the species, suckers, hooks, spines and tentacles that look like they have writhed from a horror movie. Tapeworms absorb nutrients from the digested food sloshing around in the host's gut. That's why people can lose weight.


Anatomie Vivante:

OR,

Living Skeleton!

This extraordinary Production of Nature, has been examined by many of the most eminent of the Faculty in France and in England, who pronounce him a great Phenomenon. He has been brought to this Country at a considerable Expense, in the confident hope he will contribute to the advancement of Science.—He is 28 Years of Age, in good health, and has from his birth resembled a Skeleton, although he has attained an enlargement of Bone equal to any of his Age.

The Faculty and the Public are invited to view so unparalleled a Being, who is now Exhibiting

AT THE

Chinese Saloon,
94, PALL MALL.

Hours of Exhibition from 10 to 1, and from 2 to 6.
ADMISSION, 2s. 6d. each Person.

N. B. A Historical and Anatomical Description of the Anatomie, with Three Copper-plate Engravings to be had only, at the Rooms, Price 1s.

E. Thomas, Printer, Denmark Court, Strand

> *"An indecent exposure of human suffering and degradation"*

You may not know what the pills bought on Internet sites really contain. (That applies to any conventional or alternative medicine you buy over the web. Be cautious and buy from reputable suppliers.) In 2018, for example, an obese 20-year-old was admitted to a hospital in Beijing, China, suffering from persistent headaches and abdominal pain. The year before, she read online that consuming tapeworm eggs could produce weight loss. She bought capsules supposedly containing eggs of the beef tapeworm. After taking two capsules, she lost 27kg (952oz) in four months. She then took another capsule.

But beef tapeworm eggs do not mature in humans. They need to infect cattle first. Humans become infected after eating raw or undercooked infected beef. (Cooking kills tapeworms and other pathogens. So, ensure meat, fish and seafood are well cooked.) In other words, pills containing beef tapeworm eggs would not have led to weight loss.

Pork tapeworm eggs, on the other hand, can mature in humans. After hatching, young pork tapeworms can form cysts around the body. Young tapeworms infected the woman's brain, tongue, muscles, liver and other tissues. In other words, the capsules probably contained eggs of pork or another tapeworm. She recovered after treatment.

Today, Mounjaro, Wegovy and Ozempic have become one of the few drugs almost anyone can name alongside, for instance, Viagra, aspirin and penicillin. Politicians and journalists use weight-loss jabs to capture the headlines. They have prompted countless 'celebrity endorsements' and even inspired a *South Park* episode. And hopefully they will spell the end of using tapeworms for weight loss.

NOTES

1 Y Nawa, C Hatz and J Blum, "Sushi delights and parasites: the risk of fishborne and foodborne parasitic zoonoses in Asia", *Clin Infect Dis* 2005;41:1297-303

2 TM Goater, CP Goater and GW Esch, *Parasitism: The Diversity and Ecology of Animal Parasites*, Cambridge University Press, second edition, 2014.

3 OH Del Brutto and HH García, "*Taenia solium* Cysticercosis – The lessons of history", *Journal of the Neurological Sciences* 2015;359:392-395.

4 MT Galán-Puchades and MV Fuentes, "On hazardous pills for weight loss and cysticercosis", *American Journal of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene* 2022;107:216; HY Zhang, GX Wang, YY Xing, et al., "Case report: disseminated cysticercosis due to intentional ingestion of parasitic worm eggs for weight loss", *American Journal of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene* 2021;106:710-713;. "Iowa woman swallows tapeworm to lose weight: https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2013/08/16/tapeworm-weight-loss-scam/2666005/.

5 RH Park and MP Park, "Goya's living skeleton", *British Medical Journal* 1991;303:1594-6.

6 G Cross, *Freak Show Legacies*, Bloomsbury Academic, 2021, p.210.

7 G Hooper, "Goya's living skeleton", *British Medical Journal* 1992;304:1116.

MARK GREENER is a Cambridge-based medical writer and the clinical editor of *Pharmacy Magazine*. He writes regularly for a number of publications, including FT.

A village ghost story

LIZ HODGKINSON tells the story of a haunting in a sleepy Cambridgeshire village and its investigation by the Society for Psychical Research.

LEFT: A 'women dressed as men competition', Waresley, 1937. Margaret Minney is at the far left of the back row. **BELOW**: Vicarage Farm, with an arrow pointing to the bedroom where the ghost of Johnnie Minney manifested

Waresley is a tiny picture-postcard Cambridgeshire village of about 200 inhabitants where you might think nothing exciting ever happens. And mostly, it doesn't. But in 1965 it was the scene of one of the most closely-investigated paranormal happenings of the 20th century.

It all centred round Margaret Minney, who lived at Vicarage Farm. I knew Miss Minney well as she often came into my mother's flower shop in the nearby market town of St Neots and I stared at her as she always wore trousers – most unusual for women in those days – and she looked exactly like a man. She had a deep, gravelly smoker's voice and was perhaps the nearest one got to transgender in those days. Miss Minney was a no-nonsense, down-to-earth, tough-talking spinster who farmed pigs and sheep, cutting off the tails of newborn lambs, which she then fried and ate, after skinning them. "They tasted absolutely delicious," she would tell people as they blanched at the prospect of this gruesome-sounding delicacy.

She also castrated her pigs herself, and she had no interest in ghosts or the paranormal. She certainly never sought fame or publicity, but it came to her anyway.

When she inherited Vicarage Farm after her parents died, she divided the house into two self-contained units; one for herself and one to rent out. In 1964, Shirley Ross, an Australian woman who was interested in mediæval churches, became her tenant. A year later, a friend of Shirley's, fellow Australian Stella Herbert, came to stay and Shirley put her up in her spare bedroom.

Stella had only been there for one night when she witnessed a most unusual and disturbing occurrence. In her own words: "I think I had been asleep for some time when I was awakened by a little boy kneeling at the side of my bed and looking at me with a pleading look. I can still see his face, so thin and drawn, and he gave me the impression that had he stood up he would have been tall and bony. His hair was fair and falling to one side.

"I sat up in bed and although he did not speak I could feel he was asking me to call his mummy, and I tried to call, 'Mummy!' The strange thing was that I knew Mrs Ross was sleeping in the next room, but I also knew that was where he wanted me to call his mother from. I could feel his hands clawing at my arm – almost hurting it. I can remember the sensation vividly. This seemed to go on for a long, long time and I was very distressed but not afraid.

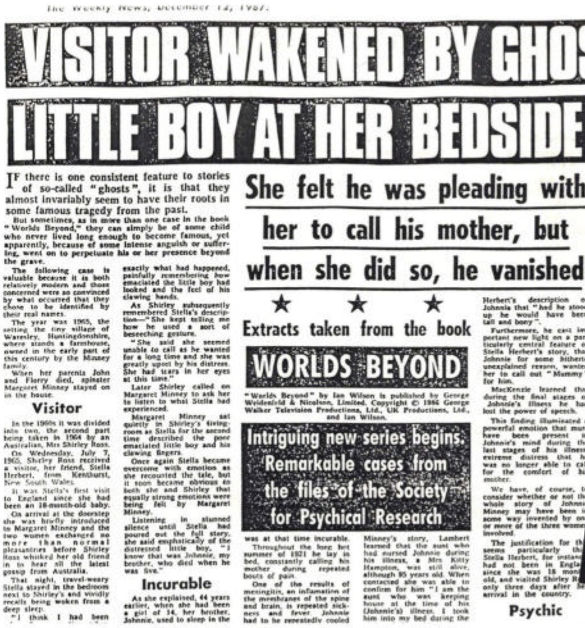
"Eventually I called 'Mummy!' rather loudly and at that moment he disappeared. He had seemed to be dressed in nightclothes. (I got the feeling he was wearing pyjamas.) Soon after that I went back to sleep."

Next morning, Shirley Ross brought her guest a cup of tea in bed and Stella, in a highly emotional state, related this strange happening to her friend. To take Stella's mind off the shock Shirley took her to St Neots for the day, to look at the fine 14th century church there. In the evening, the two of them called on Margaret Minney next door to tell her about the apparition. Miss Minney went white and started shaking. She said, "I know that was Johnnie, my brother, who died when he was five."

She went on to explain to the two Australians that Johnnie had become very ill with meningitis. His parents had been away at an exhibition and when they returned Johnnie was rushed to St Thomas' Hospital in London. Three weeks later he was sent home and put to bed. This was in the summer of 1921. He became unable to eat and as a result, increasingly emaciated. He died in August that year.

There were no more such sightings and after two weeks Stella returned to Australia.

But Shirley Ross decided not to leave it there. On 22 October 1965 she wrote to the Society for Psychical Research (SPR), giving a full account of what had happened. The case was immediately investigated by Guy Lambert, a former President of the Society, who went to call on Margaret Minney.[1] She was happy to co-operate and showed Lambert a photo of Johnnie, aged about three. While in Waresley, Lambert also visited Johnnie's aunt, Mrs Kitty Hamp-



The Weekly News, December 12, 1987.

VISITOR WAKENED BY GHOST OF LITTLE BOY AT HER BEDSIDE

She felt he was pleading with her to call his mother, but when she did so, he vanished

★ ★ ★

Extracts taken from the book

WORLDS BEYOND

"Worlds Beyond" by Ian Wilson is published by George Weidenfeld & Nicolson, Limited. Copyright © 1986 George Walker Television Productions, Ltd., UK Productions, Ltd., and Ian Wilson.

Intriguing new series begins. Remarkable cases from the files of the Society for Psychical Research

IF there is one consistent feature to stories of so-called "ghosts", it is that they almost invariably seem to have their roots in some famous tragedy from the past.

But sometimes, as in more than one case in the book "Worlds Beyond," they can simply be of some child who never lived long enough to become famous, yet apparently, because of some intense anguish or suffering, went on to perpetuate his or her presence beyond the grave.

The following case is valuable because it is both relatively modern and those concerned were so convinced by what occurred that they chose to be identified by their real names.

The year was 1965, the setting the tiny village of Waresley, Huntingdonshire, where stands a farmhouse, owned in the early part of this century by the Minney family.

When her parents John and Florry died, spinster Margaret Minney stayed on in the house.

Visitor

In the 1960s it was divided into two, the second part being taken in 1964 by an Australian, Mrs Shirley Ross.

On Wednesday, July 7, 1965, Shirley Ross received a visitor, her friend, Stella Herbert, from Kenthurst, New South Wales.

It was Stella's first visit to England since she had been an 18-month-old baby.

On arrival at the doorstep she was briefly introduced to Margaret Minney and the two women exchanged no more than normal pleasantries before Shirley Ross whisked her old friend in to hear all the latest gossip from Australia.

That night, travel-weary Stella stayed in the bedroom next to Shirley's and vividly recalls being woken from a deep sleep.

"I think I had been

exactly what had happened, painfully remembering how emaciated the little boy had looked and the feel of his clawing hands.

As Shirley subsequently remembered Stella's description—"She kept telling me how he used a sort of beseeching gesture.

"She said she seemed unable to call as he wanted for a long time and she was greatly upset by his distress. She had tears in her eyes at this time."

Later Shirley called on Margaret Minney to ask her to listen to what Stella had experienced.

Margaret Minney sat quietly in Shirley's living-room as Stella for the second time described the poor emaciated little boy and his clawing fingers.

Once again Stella became overcome with emotion as she recounted the tale, but it soon became obvious to both she and Shirley that equally strong emotions were being felt by Margaret Minney.

Listening in stunned silence until Stella had poured out the full story, she said emphatically of the distressed little boy, "I know that was Johnnie, my brother, who died when he was five."

Incurable

As she explained, 44 years earlier, when she had been a girl of 14, her brother, Johnnie, used to sleep in the

was at that time incurable.

Throughout the long hot summer of 1921 he lay in bed, constantly calling his mother during repeated bouts of pain.

One of the results of meningitis, an inflamation of the membranes of the spine and brain, is repeated sickness and fever. Johnnie had to be repeatedly cooled

Minney's story, Lambert learned that the aunt who had nursed Johnnie during his illness, a Mrs Kitty Hampton, was still alive, although 95 years old. When contacted she was able to confirm for him "I am the aunt who was keeping house at the time of his (Johnnie's) illness. I took him into my bed during the

Herbert's description of Johnnie that "had he stood up he would have been tall and bony".

Furthermore, he cast important new light on a particularly central feature of Stella Herbert's story, that Johnnie for some hitherto unexplained reason, wanted her to call out "Mummy" for him.

MacKenzie learned that during the final stages of Johnnie's illness he had lost the power of speech.

This finding illuminated a powerful emotion that must have been present in Johnnie's mind during the last stages of his illness, extreme distress that he was no longer able to call for the comfort of his mother.

We have, of course, to consider whether or not the whole story of Johnnie Minney may have been in some way invented by one or more of the three women involved.

The justification for th seems particularly th Stella Herbert, for instan had not been in Engla since she was 18 mon old, and visited Shirley R only three days after her arrival in the country.

Psychic

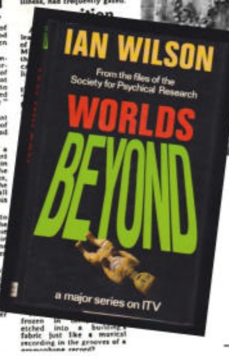
Minney after Stella's experience.

Margaret Minney confirmed that she had never previously spoken about her dead brother in any prior conversation with Shirley Ross.

Before concluding, one further ostensibly paranormal circumstance associated with Margaret Minney's account of Johnnie's death should perhaps be mentioned.

Apparently he died at 10 o'clock at night and, according to what she was told by her mother the next day, at the moment of his death a flash of white light and a cross appeared on a door in the room at which Johnnie, during the last stages of his illness, had frequently gazed.

frozen in
etched into a building's
fabric just like a musical
recording in the grooves of a



BELOW: A photo of Johnnie Minney aged three. **ABOVE**: Johnnie Minney's grave. **LEFT**: The story was told in Ian Wilson's book *World's Beyond* and the TV series of the same name.

ton, who, although now 95, was perfectly *compos mentis* and added some important details.

She said: "I was keeping house at the time of Johnnie's illness. I took him into my bed during the night, before his parents returned. He was very distressed. He was a very lovable child – everyone loved him. At his death he was wasted to skin and bone."

A year later, another investigator, Andrew Mackenzie, took up the case. He learned that in the final stages of Johnnie's illness, the little boy had lost the power of speech and was unable to call out 'Mummy' as he had done earlier.

What was the explanation, according to the psychic researchers? They first wondered whether the whole story had been made up, but soon discounted this possibility. Stella Herbert had, after all, only been in England for three days before visiting Shirley Ross, so she neither had much opportunity to learn about Johnnie Minney nor, crucially, any motivation for wanting to concoct such a tale. Shirley Ross emphasised that she had never heard of Johnnie Minney and Margaret Minney said she had not spoken about her dead brother to Mrs Ross. So, did Shirley Ross see Johnnie's gravestone in Waresley churchyard and fabricate a story from that? Even if she had, this would not account for the vivid apparition that presented itself to Stella Herbert, now back in Australia, whom the researchers also contacted.

"I know that was Johnnie, my brother, who died when he was five"

And then Miss Minney said that she had never shown Shirley the photograph of Johnnie, which she kept in a drawer.

The researchers concluded that this was one of the most genuine examples of a paranormal happening that they had ever encountered, as none of the three women had anything to gain by colluding in the story and, importantly, they were all willing to have their names on record. Often, such sightings were anonymously reported.

There was just one more incident that Miss Minney remembered. Johnnie had died at 10 o'clock at night and her mother told her that at the moment of his death, there was a flash of white light and a cross appeared on the door of his room. Could the flash have a simple explanation, such as car headlights, Andrew Mackenzie wondered. Miss Minney said no: the farm was down a track, a long way from the road.

Mackenzie's interpretation of the phenomenon was that in the final stages of his illness, Johnnie had lost the ability to speak and though he tried to call out to his mother, was unable to do so. As a result, psychic tension built up in the room and this was eventually transmitted to Mrs Herbert. Ghosts, Mackenzie believed, may be frozen in time and etched into a building's fabric, only to manifest themselves to somebody sensitive to that sort of thing.

This account first appeared in public in a 1986 book by Ian Wilson, *Worlds Beyond*, as a collection of investigations from the files of the SPR. The book formed the basis for a 13-part TV series, of which Johnnie Minney's story is the most dramatic and the most closely documented. There seems to be simply no other explanation but that Stella Herbert actually saw Johnnie's ghost.

Much later, in the 1990s, Miss Minney said that when Johnnie was in hospital, his mother was only allowed to see him through a glass door and the little boy kept crying out for her.

However, this is not quite the end of the story. Miss Minney is immortalised in a comic novel, *See Him Sweat*, by Philip Norman, as Miss Maxey. He writes: "Miss Maxey moved in front of the headlights. She was, to outward appearances, a man. She was dressed in tartan, a coat that shone enough to be velvet; a white shirt, bow tie and wellington boots turned down." After the novel was published Philip was terrified that Miss Minney would sue, but although she was highly affronted, and constantly grumbled to my mother about the nasty depiction of her in the book, she eventually calmed down.

She died on 30 October 1994 aged 87. When asked her secret for a long and healthy life, she replied briskly: "A large glass of scotch and water at bedtime. It keeps the arteries open!" The farm then passed out of the Minney family, as there were no direct descendants. It was last sold in 2020 for £1.5 million. But so far as we know, there have been no other sightings of Johnnie Minney's ghost. Perhaps Stella Herbert finally laid him to rest.

[1] GW Lambert, "An apparition of a child: The case of Johnnie M.", *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 43, 1965-66, pp.428-31.

This story is told in Liz's latest book, *A Mink Coat in St Neots: My Mother's Flower Shop and the Mystery of a Wealthy Russian Princess,* published by Mount Orleans Press.

LIZ HODGKINSON is an author and journalist with a strong interest in the paranormal. She has written over 50 books on a wide variety of subjects, including one on Psychic Counselling. Liz is the mother of writers Tom Hodgkinson and Will Hodgkinson and has five adult grandchildren. She lives in Oxford.

THE WORLD OF STRANGE PHENOMENA

ForteanTimes

SUBSCRIBE TODAY AND GET 3 ISSUES FOR £3

For anyone with a sense of adventure, an enquiring mind and a love of the weird and wonderful...

Every month, ForteanTimes takes you on an incredible journey into the unknown where you'll encounter some of the most fantastic phenomena on Earth... and sometimes beyond.

GREAT REASONS TO SUBSCRIBE

- First 3 Issues for £3 *
- Free delivery of every issue
- Save on the cover price
- Every issue delivered before its available to buy in shops

ORDER TODAY!

shop.forteantimes.com
hello@metropolis.co.uk
020 8752 8195

* The trial offer will automatically revert to a 6-month direct debit which will auto renew.
If you wish to cancel the direct debit offer, please contact us via phone or email. Offer is valid for new UK customers only and one trial per household.

SAS vs GNOMES
ForteanTimes
NIGHTMARE BEFORE CHRISTMAS
THE SOUTH SHIELDS POLTERGEIST REVISITED
GHOST RIDERS IN THE SKY
ANOMALY HOTSPOTS
FORGOTTEN FOLKLORIST
The other face on the Shroud of Turin!
THE WASHINGTON STAIN
WILD TALENTS THOMAS PYNCHON: SECRET FORTEAN?
PARTYING GHOSTS SEASONAL SPECTRES AT THE FEAST
TEMPLAR TOWERS PORTUGAL'S PALACE OF SECRETS
THE WORLD OF STRANGE PHENOMENA
ForteanTimes
THE WORLD'S WEIRDEST NEWS
FT466 JANUARY 2026 £5.40
THE HAUNTED SCREEN
JOHN LOGIE BAIRD AND THE OCCULT ORIGINS OF TELEVISION
MARTIN'S DEVILS
THE STRANGE STORY OF FINLAND'S MOST FAMOUS POLTERGEIST CASE
WALTZING WITH SPIRITS
VIENNA'S ESOTERIC ART UNDERWORLD
FROM BLONDIE TO THE GREAT BEYOND!
Gary Lachman's Quest for the Miraculous
MORE MORGUE MIX-UPS
NOT FROM URANUS
MYSTERY BEAMS
DRUNKEN RACCOON RAMPAGE · TALKING PLANTS · PHANTOM BOOBS
ForteanTimes
FT467 FEBRUARY 20
WIZARD OF GLASTONBURY
THE STRANGE LIFE AND COSMIC FICTION OF JOHN COWPER POWYS
CHICKEN ROUNDABOUT

REVIEWS / BOOKS

TO SEND REVIEW COPIES, CONTACT THE BOOK REVIEWS EDITOR AT DVBARRETT@FORTEANTIMES.COM

The past and present of folklore

Paul Cowdell is a little critical of what he sees as the authors' sometimes anxious approach to their study, but overall he reckons you'll be hooked by this useful and meticulously documented history

Folklore

A Journey through the Past and the Present

Owen Davies & Ceri Houlbrook

Manchester University Press 2025
Hb, 368pp, £20, ISBN 9781526180384

Folklore is having A Moment. From popular TV to national surveys, proliferating genres of film to new academic courses, the outcast child has come home. This major, serious and useful book on the subject reflects the trend, while also helping orientate around it. It's worth having.

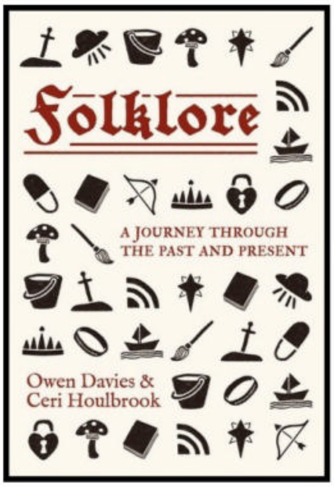
The authors, who teach an MA in Folklore, should be familiar to FT readers, and all their work is recommended. Owen Davies has published extensively on the social history of magic, ghosts and supernatural belief. Ceri Houlbrook has written and broadcast on apotropaic objects, coin trees and love-locks, as well as having penned a folklore-inflected novel.

That both work in history is visible in the book's construction and style. This is a meticulously documented history of the present. Its study of folklore now draws closely on the study of folklore in the past, through press coverage especially. It is an excellent way of making their point that folklore continues all around us, often going uncelebrated because of its quietly informal character. This also creates a problematic "triviality barrier" for scholars. The anxieties this generates seem to haunt this book.

Their appeal to documentation of that kind reads at times like an attempt to legitimise folklore's value as a subject, making even contemporary material sometimes feel like a backward glance. They cite current folklorists – Houlbrook provides many of the photographs of objects, murals, etc – but a world of contemporary fieldwork with practitioners and tradition-bearers feels sometimes only implied.

They are sensitive to representations of folklore in popular culture and modern media, with two chapters on this area, although it can read like they are as concerned with the imprimatur that popular representation gives folklore as with the representation itself. And their political judgement is undermined by identifying Dennis's analysis in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* as "a Marxist speech", when he's explicit about being in an anarcho-syndicalist collective!

The book's main aim feels, valuably, to be opening a door to the wide range of material available for study, and how it has been studied. This also poses the biggest challenge, as the opening sentence acknowledges: "Folklore means different things to different people." The work's division is correspondingly broad. It shows the book's ambition, even if it cannot hope to be comprehensive, and some parts are more satisfactory than others.


Folklore
A JOURNEY THROUGH THE PAST AND PRESENT
Owen Davies & Ceri Houlbrook

> *Today's folklorists now recognise that every group of people will have its own folklore*

The seven sections – with one crucial exception – all feature two chapters, although the logical separation of the contents cannot always be clear or straightforward. The sections are in part groupings by convenience to introduce the material.

"Coming together and taking part" covers calendar customs and performance, although these also have points of contact with the chapter on "Rituals in the landscape" included alongside the supernatural in the section "Spiritual life". Those topics are hardly separable from the folklore of the natural world featured, with folk medicine, under "Environment".

"Stories" is self-explanatory enough, and the most closely tied to folklore's analytical history, but even this touches other areas thanks to the broad scope and contemporary focus. This will be particularly appealing to FT readers, featuring urban legends, cryptozoology and legend tripping.

The introduction has the most to do, offering a crash course in the history of folklore and how we think about it. This is essential stuff, though the outline here can only provide the briefest of preliminaries. At times the authors seem slightly anxious both at how much they are trying to cover and at its possible reception ("At the mention of 'theory' the reader may be tempted to skip ahead, but bear with us…"). They should trust their instincts more, as that conciliatory approach may lead them to inadvertently downplay the very thing they are trying to get across. This seems to be because they're trying to sketch out the history of studying folklore as well as the range of folklore it has studied, but that's a good thing.

The authors feel more comfortable when reviewing and documenting the folklore itself. They make some sensible observations on whose folklore has often not been covered. Early folklorists looked to the countryside, with urban folklorists somewhat atypical. This also served to marginalise and exclude city-dwelling ethnic and migrant minority groups even further. Folklorists have long moved away from such narrow rural conceptions and exclusivist views of folklore: we now recognise that every group of people will have its own folklore. Davies and Houlbrook do a good job in addressing the fact that Britain is culturally diverse in a way the early folklorists could not have accommodated.

That the final section, "Identity", comprises a single chapter on "The folklore of nations" points to some of the biggest questions lurking underneath this new upsurge of interest in folklore. They point to an earlier slipperiness on distinguishing English/British and how this is manifesting post-Brexit. Many folklorists today are wrestling with these thorny questions, and I'm not convinced a simple snapshot overview could ever be entirely satisfactory, but Davies and Houlbrook point to some useful recent work along the way.

They do an excellent job wrangling a great big fascinating subject. It's not definitive, because nothing could be, but you'll be hooked, and so you should be.

★★★★

Three Christs – and others

Jennifer Wallis enjoys an excellent history of psychiatric disorders and unusual delusions

The Man Who Lost His Head

On Illusions and Delusions of the Mind

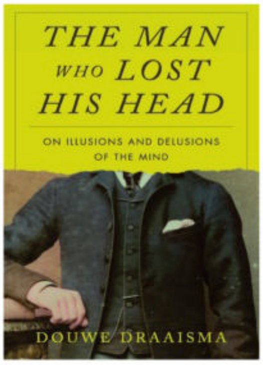
Douwe Draaisma

Reaktion 2025

Hb, 208pp, £15.99, ISBN 9781836390886

Many books have charted famous delusions such as Cotard's syndrome, in which sufferers believe that they are dead, or Capgras syndrome, in which sufferers believe a loved one has been replaced by an identical imposter. For this reason, it was with a slight weariness that I began Draaisma's book, but I was very pleasantly surprised by his approach to the topic.

Draaisma is careful to situate his analyses of various delusions within their historical context, cautioning against the kind of retrospective diagnosis that often proves tempting to those in the medical field when reading about historical cases. For example: to declare that Samuel Johnson, who died in 1784, had Tourette's syndrome, a condition identified in 1885, involves an almost complete dismissal of contemporary understandings of health and illness, as well as a disregard for the nuances of historical sources and publishing practices. It is refreshing to read such a clearly articulated argument about the perils of retrospective diagnosis in this book, and as a result Draaisma's analysis is much more interesting than simply "finding out what someone *really* suffered from".


THE MAN WHO LOST HIS HEAD
ON ILLUSIONS AND DELUSIONS OF THE MIND
DOUWE DRAAISMA

The chapters, which may seem disparate at first, connect very well to one another to tell an historical story about the precarity of selfhood and the history of neurology. The work of Milton Rokeach at the Ypsilanti State Hospital in Michigan during the late 1950s and early 1960s is Draaisma's starting point. Rokeach is well known for his work with "the three Christs of Ypsilanti": three psychiatric patients who each believed themselves the son of God. Rokeach undertook a series of rather unethical experiments to "test" the patients' faith in their assertions. He failed to persuade the three Christs to discard their divine identities – what, after all, would be left of them in the absence of their belief?

As the book progresses the theme of absence is central to the conditions discussed. In Cotard's syndrome, patients denied their own existence, believing themselves killed or maimed in real-life incidents that had, in reality, passed without serious physical impact. There is an insightful chapter on research into phantom limb syndrome, recognising the blurred line between fact and fiction that can be seen in early work on the topic, but also bringing us into the modern day with some fascinating case studies that encourage the reader to consider modern-day ethical quandaries in medicine, particularly elective amputation in cases of what is now termed Body Integrity Identity Disorder.

Some readers may be frustrated with Draaisma's focus on neurological explanations for "delusions" and wish for more recognition of other explanatory frameworks (especially in the case of "grief hallucinations"). But, as an account of how the development of neurology drew upon bodily delusions to better understand the workings of the brain, this is an accessible and engaging contribution to existing literature.

★★★★

Doctor Who

A Cultural History

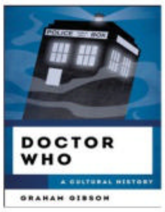
Graham Gibson

Rowman & Littlefield 2025

Hb, 220pp, £30, ISBN 9781538192405

There are, at present, around 20 titles in "The Cultural History of Television" series, each dedicated to a series that has had some degree of cultural resonance. What is clear is that each is written by someone with a degree of enthusiasm regarding their eponymous series, and this is no exception: it's also gratifying to note that despite being a very US-centric book series the author of this volume is a Scot, so does have a proper contextual understanding of *Doctor Who*'s very individual position within British TV's annals.

Starting with a somewhat perfunctory summary of *Who*'s inception and development – a single page describes the Britain of 1963 and barely 10 more are given to the whole of the pre-production saga, which was actually far more convoluted than intimated here – we move onto what's clearly the author's home ground, i.e., knowledge of *Doctor Who*, and Gibson is very keen to share these insights. Indeed, much of the book is taken up with very detailed descriptions of the various incarnations of the Doctor, their costumes, their personalities, the actors that played them… in fact it comes over rather like the Dorling Kindersley book of Time Lords, albeit with slightly longer words and drastically fewer pictures.



All that said, it would be unfair to characterise the entire book as straight descriptive prose. Indeed, Part III is named "Cultural Impact and Influence", with chapters such as "Gender Identity and Awareness" and "Changes in Pronouns & Ethnicity", each of which devotes at least an entire page to actual cultural commentary before, perhaps inevitably, launching into detailed descriptions of the various examples of character diversity – their costumes, their personality, the actors that played them, etc – before concluding with another page or three of whataboutery. In fairness, the whole of Chapter 15 is given over to the show's wider impact on popular media, devoting an impressive five pages to *Who* references in other programmes before concluding with a chapter on what the future may hold for the programme, presumably provided the traditional, annual cancellation rumour proves false.

Ultimately, this is a clearly well-meaning piece, but largely mistakes description for analysis. In addition, there are a number of inconsistencies and typos; for example John Simm gains a terminal "s" to his surname throughout. These criticisms aside, the author's affection does shine through and as a primer to help fill in some contextual gaps for non-Brits it proves quite readable, but if it's a detailed and articulate discussion you want there are other works that fulfil that purpose with far greater depth. Despite its Tardis-themed cover, this book is disappointingly smaller on the inside.

Stu Neville

★★★

The Folklore of the Tanat Valley

Jack Hunter

Plenty Wenlock Press 2025

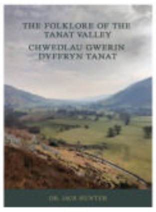
Pb, 58pp, £10, ISBN 9781919246109

The Tanat river runs for 16 miles between Bala and Oswestry, past living stones, the graves of giants and fairy-haunted crags. Jack Hunter grew up here, at ease in two languages and all weathers, and in this slim volume he brings home his expertise in the anthropology of the paranormal.

The folklore in this book is confined to the supernatural – that underlying realm which crops up unpredictably in story and lived experience. Welsh culture took this in its stride. Level-headed hill farmers would consult the *dyn hysbys* or cunning man as the most logical strategy after cattle medicine had failed. Magic was part of their world, not an exotic alternative culture.

Welsh folklore differed from English, though the cultures seem to have diverged in the Middle Ages and not in some remote Celtic period. Giants are important figures for local pride, protagonists in stories which

would be attributed to the Devil in England. The line between *ysbrydoedd* and *ysbrydion*, spirits and ghosts, is thin: traditional apparitions take eerie forms such as a White Lady or a sow in chains, while the tragic ghost of a figure from the past seems to be an English cultural import.


THE FOLKLORE OF THE TANAT VALLEY
CHWEDLAU GWERIN DYFFRYN TANAT
DR JACK HUNTER

Hunter draws binary distinctions between a magic ancestral world and a scientific modern one: he has less to say about how folkloric thinking grows and changes over time. Christianity features only in two pages on Saints Cynog and Melangell, not as a supernatural worldview in its own right.

His book is at its best when it links the traditions of the recent past with contemporary experience. Fairies are returning to the hills, though they have become more New Age and much less dangerous, and the lore of distant lights has a contemporary manifestation in the Berwyn Mountain UFO.

The supernatural is no stranger in the Tanat Valley. It emerges naturally from language and life: a tendency to personify the weather, to attribute agency to strange or awkward things. The senses must always be alert in this wild countryside, and who is to say that they will not glimpse the goblin fires of the *Ellyll Dân* or hear the baying of the *Cwn Annwn* as they hunt the skies?

Jeremy Harte

★★★★

Could Should Might Don't

How We Think about the Future

Nick Foster

Canongate Books 2025

Hb, 352pp, £22, ISBN 9781837263806

If a little cryptically, the title and subtitle tell you most of what you need to know about this book. To be completely accurate, the subtitle should probably read "how different people think about the future", while the undeniably eye-catching main title groups the options into four categories.

"Could" refers to the technological optimists – people like Elon Musk, for example, who see technology constantly transforming the world for the better, if we put enough time and effort into it.

"Should", on the other hand, are the ideological politicians – of one shade or another – who are filled with revolutionary zeal and have nothing but contempt for those who disagree with them.

"Might", for me, was the biggest disappointment in the book, because I felt Foster overlooked what is perhaps the most important category of all – people who get excited by the possibility of paradigm-busting developments like contact with extraterrestrials or the emergence of super-powered mutants. This would have been a great section for readers of this magazine, but actually Foster's "Might" category refers to the ultra-dull topic of mathematical and statistical modelling.

Finally, "Don't" means, of course, those pessimistic naysayers who have always been with us – whether as religious fanatics in the past, or anti-nuclear protestors and climate activists today.

Could
Should
Might
Don't
Nick Foster

All in all, the book's subject matter is interesting and thought-provoking enough, although Foster's writing style is a little too vague and rambling for my taste. The book has no index or list of reference sources, for example, which make it read more like a series of opinion pieces or blog posts than a serious analysis of its subject.

Andrew May

★★★

Stone Lands

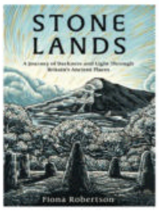
A Journey of Darkness and Light through Britain's Ancient Places

Fiona Robertson

Robinson 2025

Hb, 400pp, £25, ISBN 9781472149183

Fiona Robinson, an *éminence grise* in stone circles and a long-time stone-hugger, has written a deeply personal and literate travelogue. Initially it appears to comprise a series of succinct Neolithic and Bronze Age "megalithic" site vignettes threaded together by an observed grief. She, her dying husband, plus their less enthusiastic children, visit and revisit favourite British ancient locations, including all of the expected ones, as they approach, later to walk through and beyond, his inexorable passing.


STONE
LANDS
A Journey of Darkness and Light Through Britain's Ancient Places
Fiona Robertson

The book is poetic and spiritual and a sounding-board for myriad random thoughts. Shelley's "Ozymandias" seems frozen in a striking lithographic print by Philip Harris of Oxfordshire's Rollright Stones and later Robert Frost's untrodden path is perhaps unintentionally quoted.

However, it can be, perhaps should be, read as more: as an extended stratified exploration-cum-meditation on the interaction of stone and intense emotions. For her and for many other fellow enthusiasts/pilgrims, even casual visitors, the sites have an apotropaic presence. For them there is more than just touching the stones, in sequence, for luck; it is akin to telling the beads. Indeed, many of her actions evoke shades of catholic (and Catholic) folk traditions.

Perhaps Parker-Pearson and Ramilisonina are correct: wooden circles memorialise the living and stone ones, whilst embracing the dead, perhaps, forever, will comfort the living. The author fervently believes so and emotes her case well.

Rob Ixer

★★★★

The Secret of the Thoth Tarot

The Origins of Aleister Crowley's Book of Thoth

Paul Hughes-Barlow

Aeon Books 2025

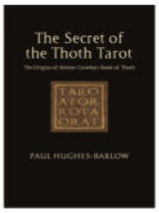
Pb, 266pp, £19.99, ISBN 9781801521895

Yet another addition to the K2-sized mountain of Crowley-related texts, Hughes-Barlow's exposition on *The Book of Thoth* – Aleister Crowley's re-inscription of the tarot – is very much a practitioner's manual and one that reasserts the importance of tarot to the Thelemic universe.

Although there is a significant amount of historical detail, namely Crowley's own experience of the tarot under the auspices of MacGregor Mathers' (1854-1918) Golden Dawn and the importance of the order's Cipher Manuscripts, the bulk of the text deals exclusively with the Thoth tarot as an initiatory tool.

Of interest are the details of Crowley's incorporation of the tarot into his own overarching philosophical system. The underplayed masonic element of his endeavour – through the somewhat mysterious Society of Eight and their contact with occult superstar Eliphas Levi (1810-1875) – offers a different perspective to existing documentation and is of genuine interest.

The author intimates that the significance of the tarot has been wilfully ignored by the OTO, the organisation that promulgates Crowley's legacy and copyrights, and that his own work offers a corrective measure as such. As one would expect, the relationship between Crowley and tarot artist Lady Frieda Harris (1872-1962) is scrutinised through the lens of master and pupil, culminating with the publication of *The Book of Thoth* in 1944, although as we discover through Hughes-Barlow's research the groundwork was begun back in Crowley's Cefalú days in 1920.



The scope is formidable. Offering a detailed analysis of the theoretical application of the *Book of Thoth* as a tool of spiritual growth, there are chapters focusing on its interrelationship with the Qabalah, Crowley's prophetic *Liber al vel Legis* (1904), gematria, shadow work, the problem of the Black Brothers, and curiously the influence of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) on his thinking!

Including material related to specific magickal workings and the contributions of Thelemic devotees Allan Bennett (1872-1923) and George Cecil Jones (1873-1960), this book is most assuredly for the working mages out there. With a timeline, bibliography and the *Secret Formulæ of the New Aeon*, a must for all putative Ipsissimi!

Chris Hill

★★★

Bizarre Nazi beliefs

SD Tucker explores a pair of related books on the ever-fascinating (and often quite bonkers) topic of Nazi occultism

Himmler's Secret Society

Inside the SS Ahnenerbe 1936-1939

Yrjö von Grönhagen, tr. Ike Vil

Star Regulus Press 2025
Pb, 199pp, £18.99, ISBN 9789526536712

Chasing the Green Dragon

French Occult Conspiracy, Nazi Mysticism and Gaston de Mengel's Journey to the East

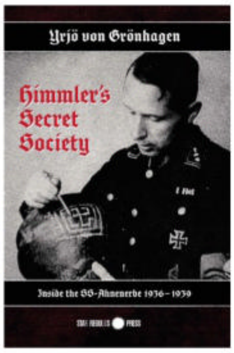
Ike Vil

Star Regulus Press 2025
Pb, 365pp, £22.99, ISBN 9789526536743

Finnish researcher Ike Vil has a new publishing firm, Star Regulus Press, which begins by putting out a pair of related books upon the ever-fascinating topic of Nazi occultism. *Himmler's Secret Society* is a translated travelogue by Yrjö von Grönhagen, a Finnish student in Paris who naively decided to walk to the Far East in search of the (non-existent) hidden underground city of Agartha in 1935. To prepare, all he thought he needed was a pith-helmet and a pair of hob-nailed boots. Persuaded that trekking across Europe might be more realistic, he decides to walk back home to Finland instead in search of the fabled "rune-singers" and witches of its remote, pre-modern countryside. What ensues seems at first simply an amusing account of a naïve chancer, one who thinks it entirely realistic to just walk into a royal castle unannounced one day and demand to see the King of Belgium.

Entering Germany, things become more serious when, via an unlikely set of circumstances, our hero becomes acquainted with none other than Heinrich Himmler. Not knowing who the Reichsführer SS is, Yrjö complains to him about the Nazis' treatment of the Jews. Fortunately, Himmler (who comes across as being a thoroughly nice man) is amused by this faux pas, and, discovering Yrjö's interest in rune-singers, offers the young ingenue work as a Finnish correspondent for his quasi-occultist SS Ahnenerbe organisation, researching the shared Nordic past of the white race.

Yrjö has no relevant qualifications beyond his pith helmet, but the Ahnenerbe is under the sway of such equally unqualified nuts as Horst Weisthor, who advocates using psychic means to perform acts of archæology, not scientific ones. Picking up random stones in the street from construction sites, the perpetually inebriated Weisthor magically perceives them to be ancient "Goth Stones", or else ones used by the Queen of the Snakes as part of a woodland ritual for the prosecution of fork-tongued criminals of her slithering species. Weisthor also frequently interrupts the pair's walks through Berlin to stare at underwear-clad dummies in the windows of lingerie shops whilst "drooling" at them. No wonder a man calling himself "Janek the Christ" turns up in his house one night demanding 20 million Reichsmarks to manufacture a deadly nuclear-type bomb powered by the mystical Aryan substance of Vril, and a pre-V2 rocket to fly him to the Moon.



Chasing the Green Dragon
Ike Vil

An amusing and entertaining tale, this is a nice short read, very well-illustrated and put together.

During his time in Naziland, Yrjö also introduced Himmler and Weisthor to an old occult associate of his named Gaston de Mengel, who spun the pair an incredibly unlikely yarn about an esoteric society, the Order of the Green Dragon, whose leader, The Man in the Green Gloves, controlled the world from behind the scenes. Green Dragon acolytes, like Pope Pius XI and Benito Mussolini, could be identified via possession of a special brand of Tibetan necklace made up of 108 shards from 108 separate human skulls. The Green Dragons pursued a sinister scheme to plunge the globe into chaos and war, involving such disparate phenomena as the assassination of the Romanovs, the kidnapping of a Soviet general and the disturbing activities of "the Swedish matchstick king, Ivar Kreuger". Himmler commissioned an official Ahnenerbe report, which officially concluded it was all bollocks. Ike Vil concludes likewise: it seems the whole story was based on a Tintin-like pulp-fiction thriller, *The Seven Heads of the Green Dragon*. But, asks Vil, was the novel itself actually a bizarre psy-ops exercise by the French secret service? The book's author apparently wanted to meet Hitler and persuade him not to invade Poland by causing phantom Tibetan monks to walk through his office wall, but sadly failed.

Vil's book takes the form of a biography of de Mengel and his entire occult career, telling how he came to spread the myth of the Green Dragon. It's admirably researched and illustrated; Vil must be commended for his efforts, although perhaps inevitably some parts of de Mengel's life are more interesting than others, and some readers may get a little confused by the smorgasbord of groups, individuals and digressions involved.

In all, two very good books: esoteric Nazism fans should really buy both.

Himmler ★★★★★
Green Dragon ★★★★

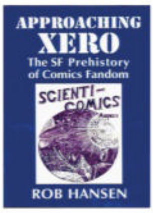
Approaching Xero

The SF Prehistory of Comics Fandom

Rob Hansen

Ansible Editions 2025 https://ae.ansible.uk/?t=Xero
Pb, 104pp, £9.99, ISBN 9781916508378

There have always been strong links between forteana (and *Fortean Times* specifically) and both science fiction and comics. Many years ago FT was stapled and envelope-stuffed at the long-lamented comics and SF shop Dark They Were and Golden-Eyed in London's Soho; a young Bob Rickard had bought Charles Fort's four books from the shop's future founder way back in 1968. Dark They Were (incidentally the cause of my editing the British Science Fiction Association's critical journal *Vector* in the 1980s) and its founder are mentioned in this latest work by Rob Hansen, the acknowledged historian of SF fandom.



The first half is a long essay on the inter-relationship between SF fanzines and comics fanzines, and how the latter arguably grew out of the former – and also their interaction with the development of the early superhero comics. It was a surprise to discover that the much-loved Irish SF writer Bob Shaw, coming from fandom, was drawing comics long before he became a novelist. Later chapters look at SF conventions and early comics conventions, and at Hansen's own childhood introduction to SF through the pages of the *Dandy* comic.

The final chapter is "The Steve Moore Trove". In 2016 Hansen discovered that Bob Rickard lived just a few streets away and took him a copy of *THEN*, his history of the first 50 years of SF fandom in the UK (reviewed **FT358:60-61**). Browsing through Bob's capacious cellar he saw a pile of old US comics – and found they came from the late Steve Moore's collection; Steve, one of the Gang of Fort, had been involved in comics fandom, and has several mentions earlier in the book. There were also very rare copies of early comics fanzines, including the first six issues of the first Irish comics zine, whose editor no longer had copies; Bob gifted them to him.

David V Barrett
★★★★

SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

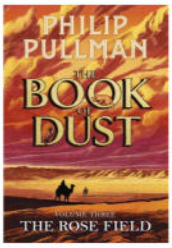
DAVID V BARRETT ROUNDS UP THE LATEST TITLES FROM THE WORLD OF SPECULATIVE AND FANTASTIC FICTION

The Rose Field: The Book of Dust Volume Three

Philip Pullman

David Fickling Books/Penguin 2025

Hb, 622pp, £25, ISBN 9780241458693



At long last, here's the final instalment of Philip Pullman's 'Book of Dust'. In the second of the trilogy, *The Secret Commonwealth* (**FT387:65**) Lyra and her dæmon Pan fell out and separated; both headed out to the distant East, Pan searching for Lyra's lost imagination and Lyra belatedly searching for Pan – and both heading for a red building in the desert where rose oil enters their world, and which might hold the secret to Dust. In a piece of monumentally bad writing (completely unexpected from Pullman) the story broke off in mid-flow. Now in *The Rose Field* it continues, after the scantiest "Previously…" page, picking up people and places and events and plot points we last read about six years ago. The despotic head of the Magisterium wants to destroy all the windows between worlds, and doesn't care who gets hurt along the way; and he very publicly wants to capture Lyra. Lyra and Pan and Malcolm (who as a boy rescued the baby Lyra in the first book of this trilogy) are in constant danger, with many adventures along the way, some of them quite spectacular – the haughty but magnificent gryphons, for example, though their sub-plot is overlong and barely relevant to the main story. Too many minor characters wander in and out without contributing much; too many sub-plots are left unresolved. After 622 pages (2,455 pages for the whole trilogy), the ending is disappointing and anticlimactic: there's too much deep philosophical discussion on the nature of Dust, and an expectation which had been allowed to grow throughout the novel is dashed. The original trilogy was wonderful; this one would have been greatly improved by being leaner, tighter and better controlled.

The Cat Bride

Charlotte Tierney

Salt 2025

Pb, 305pp, £10.99, ISBN 9781784633622

It's difficult to know with Charlotte Tierney's *The Cat Bride* whether the narrator is unreliable, or whether her mother and grandmother are. It's 16 years since a tiger-lynx hybrid at a remote private zoo escaped and killed someone; now 16-year-old Lowdy and her controlling mother (who had been close to the "tynx") have returned to the remains of the zoo and the crumbling house where Lowdy's frail grandmother still lives. Mumma and Grandma tell radically different versions of the past, and Lowdy's memories and her mother's retellings of more recent events also conflict. There's real conflict from the local villagers, convinced that a tynx still roams the moors, killing farm animals and attacking people. When Lowdy looks out of her attic window, does she see the tynx below her, or is it her hobbling grandmother? When Lowdy creeps out at night, does she see the tynx, does she identify with it – or does she in some way *become* it? Or is everything the folklore-fuelled delusions of a highly intelligent but disturbed teenage girl kept drugged by her mother and entering late into puberty? The novel is often claustrophobic, but it keeps you turning the pages.

Making History

KJ Parker

Tor 2025

Pb, 127pp, £12.99, ISBN 9781250835789

There's only one thing wrong with KJ Parker's novella *Making History*: it's too short. The narrator, an historical linguist, is one of a small group of professors recruited by First Citizen Gyges, who has seized power in Aelia and now wants to consolidate that power by creating a pretext for invading a neighbour. The academics must create the buried ruins of an ancient city complete with inscriptions in a previously unknown ancient language that is clearly a precursor of Aelian – or be executed. Obviously for the deception to work, no one, especially Aelia's neighbouring countries, must be aware of it. The task of creating a false history begins – but inevitably hits problems. Could there be a spy amongst the academics? The linguist's account of his own creative work, and that of the rest of the team, is engrossing; we learn a lot about what "history" is, and a fair bit about linguistics too. I would love this to have been a full-length novel – but it's a brilliant story anyway.

Mimeograph

Eira A Ekre

L'il Factory 2025

Hb, 57pp, £19, ISBN 9789198995527

A paperback novella is one thing; individual hardback short stories are quite another. *Mimeograph* by Eira A Ekre is the best of three very slender books from the same publisher. In a world where AI has taken over our lives, and where everything from clothes to food is made from recycled elements by 3D printing, Talia is a supervisor in a facility monitoring glitches in what the Mimeographs produce; when she spots something which suggests that reality is being swallowed, but all the rest of the staff see different things, she begins to be concerned… But seriously, however nicely produced these books are, would you spend £18 or £19 for a single short story of around 50 pages and a mere 12,000 or so words?

Dark Fairy Tales

Viktor Wynd

Prestel 2025

Hb, 240pp, £30, ISBN 9783791393506

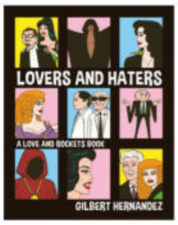
More short stories, but this time in a gorgeously-produced collection edited by Viktor Wynd, as astonishing as his Museum of Curiosities in Hackney, London. *Dark Fairy Tales* is subtitled "Stories from Around the World (That Are Definitely Not Suitable for Children)", and has an abundance of wonderful illustrations by Transylvanian artist Luciana Nedelea. Wynd has picked up these tales in his travels around the world, from Wales to Norway to Papua New Guinea; his chatty and very personal introductions to them are as fulfilling as the stories themselves – which, with witches and shapeshifting spells and death, and really quite a lot of sex, are very definitely *not* for children. Wynd is a born storyteller – and makes the vital point that every time stories are retold (including those printed here) they should change and develop and grow. A book to be cherished, with folktales to be returned to again and again.

Lovers and Haters

Gilbert Hernandez

Fantagraphics 2025

Pb, 118pp, £18.99, ISBN 9798875000980



If you discovered the *Love & Rockets* comics and anthologies decades ago, it's well worth revisiting them now; some of the old characters are still around (older if usually not wiser), and the writers still have great stories to tell. In *Lovers and Haters*, the latest offering from Gilbert Hernandez, B-movie and fetish porn actress Fritz has to contend with a controlling lover/manager, assorted seriously dodgy people in the film industry – and a whole bunch of Fritz-lookalikes trying to muscle in on her fame and grab a slice of the film action. As always with L&R graphic novels, the intricacies of the storylines are perfectly conveyed through the simple but subtle artwork. The most intriguing chapter covers three generations: Fritz as a baby, her mother Maria, Maria's estranged father, and even Maria as a baby with her mother Rosalba, after whom Fritz was named – and back to today, Fritz and her great-niece Killer, granddaughter of Fritz's older half-sister Luba, much loved from Gilbert Hernandez's early Palomar tales. Yes, it's complicated – but it powerfully demonstrates the amazing interconnectivity throughout the L&R universe(s).

Expect the unexpected

Ben Wheatley offers some mind-bending surprises, while lacklustre horrors go over old ground

Bulk

Dir Ben Wheatley, UK 2025
On tour in UK cinemas

If there is one thing Ben Wheatley cannot be accused of, it is being predictable, and with his new science fiction film, *Bulk*, the English filmmaker goes in such a diametrically opposite creative direction from his last effort, *Meg 2: The Trench*, that it may just give you cinematic whiplash.

Describing the plot of *Bulk* would not so much be difficult as it would be a disservice to the viewing experience, as this delirious and darkly witty low-budget delight deserves to be seen with as little knowledge about what lies ahead as possible.

At times feeling like an episode of *The Twilight Zone* directed by Garth Marenghi trying to emulate David Lynch – which is a compliment, by the way – *Bulk* avoids coming off as pretentious because Wheatley has soaked the film in purposeful oddness and pitch-black humour, something he has always had a knack for.

The production design, the cinematography and the decision to present the film almost entirely in black-and-white all help to create a dizzying visual landscape where the viewer is thrust into a narrative that does not care to explain itself until it becomes absolutely necessary, leaving audiences questioning what they are witnessing as this cinematic rollercoaster hurtles through its snappy 95-minute runtime.

> *A welcome breath of fresh air, brimming over with originality*

The film was shot entirely in a house in Brighton, but the confines of the setting are not immediately apparent, as Wheatley mixes different types of media and filmmaking techniques to create a world that feels distinctly vaster and more unpredictable than a residential property on England's South Coast.

Similarly, the sound design uses entirely post-synced dialogue and archive foley effects to create an enveloping soundscape that makes even the most mundane noises feel somehow unsettling and unnatural; it gives the film a sense of uncanniness and tension that becomes intrinsically intertwined with the central mystery of the story, which is largely sustained until the narrative pieces eventually start to fall into place as the film approaches its conclusion.

There's a minimal, accomplished cast, with a quartet of stars filling various roles, ensuring that there are interesting dynamics at play throughout the film, even when a character's arc seems to switch direction; audience expectations are continually subverted, not just in terms of the story and characters, but also the style of filmmaking as a whole.

For some, being presented with a film that is so difficult to define due to its playfully anarchic and meaningfully stripped-down approach will be too alienating an experience to allow them to invest in the characters and go along with the unpredictable narrative flow. However, for others, *Bulk* will be a welcome breath of fresh air, brimming over with creativity and originality, and it is reassuring that Wheatley can continue to find interesting ways to work with the various aspects of filmmaking, challenging himself and his audience in the best possible sense.

This isn't just oddity for the sake of oddity: *Bulk* still possesses a clear narrative structure – it just takes an unusual approach to it. And if there is one theme to take away after having absorbed this film, it is Wheatley's unadulterated love for his craft as both a creator and a consumer; the sincerity that saturates his latest effort shows that a filmmaker can still create a deeply original vision in spite of being given the opportunity to settle into the predictability of studio filmmaking.

Leyla Mikkelsen

★★★★☆

Jimmy and Stiggs

Dir Joe Begos, US 2024
On digital platforms

Imagine a cross between Peter Jackson's *Bad Taste* and Tarantino's *Grindhouse*, but made on the tiniest fraction of the budget, with off-the-scale amounts of drink, drugs and foul language and you're close to what writer-director Joe Begos offers us here.

Before the film has even started there are a couple of spoof fake trailers: *The Piano Killer* and *Don't Go in That House, Bitch!* They're lively, nicely shot, amusing, and over in a flash. They were directed by genremeister Eli Roth under the banner of his new media company The Horror Section, whose *raison d'etre* is to release and promote new talent for horror fans. As it turns out, the trailer for *Don't Go in That House, Bitch!* is in the process of being turned into a feature, much as happened to *The Machete*, *Thanksgiving* and *Hobo with a Shotgun* from the Grindhouse film. And apparently Snoop Dogg is doing the soundtrack.

Never mind all that, I hear you cry, what about *Jimmy and Stiggs*? The reason I went into detail about the fake trailers is that they are infinitely more enjoyable than the main feature, which concerns two scuzzy, unsuccessful film makers whose flat is invaded by aliens. That's it really. Almost from the first minute it's wall-to-wall mayhem and carnage. None of it can be taken seriously, if it was even meant to be, so while there's blood and guts and mutilation aplenty, none of it has any impact. In fact, if you can sit through the first 20 minutes there's no need to see the rest, because it's just more of the same.

I suppose it's borne out of a desire to flash one's genre-loving bona fides that films such as this, and indeed much bigger pictures, include stuff in the background that refers to films they love. In Tarantino's films, for example, characters might have the name of a real-life genre actor most people will never have heard of. In this film there's a poster for *Cannibal Holocaust* (itself a film aped by Eli Roth's *The Green Inferno*), and a neon sign

bearing the name 'Alex de Renzy', a pornographer from the 1970s and 1980s who has in some quarters inexplicably developed a cult following. There's also a clip from sexploitation film *Sex World*, which has been reissued by turd-polishers extraordinaire Vinegar Syndrome.

So, 70 minutes of terrible special effects, no story or dialogue worth mentioning, a full range of wines and spirits, and fouler language than that of *Withnail & I*. It's like being locked in a tiny room with two drunken arseholes who have hoovered up more chang than is good for them. And yet… it must have something, because Begos knows how to sustain a mood, has structured his film well and is absolutely committed to the whole damn thing. There are too many bloated, pretentious, blandly-directed films around these days that films such as *Jimmy and Stiggs* are necessary. They might not be good, but at least they don't make the mistakes that more feted films do. It's like when you're watching yet another Jane Austen-inspired country house costume drama; sometimes you long for Pauly Shore to rush in and give someone a wedgie. This film is that wedgie.

Daniel King

★★☆☆☆

Primate

Dir Johannes Roberts, US 2025
In UK cinemas

Johannes Roberts has carved out his own niche with his purposefully schlocky horrors that riff on the type of fare you'd associate with Eighties direct-to-video rentals, their elaborate, nightmarish cover art promising low-budget, blood-soaked campiness on the tape within.

With *Primate*, Roberts continues in the same lane, as his latest effort tells the tale of a rabies-infected pet chimpanzee – which is indeed the exact kind of post-*Cujo* schlock you would have expected to find in the 1980s when anything Stephen King or remotely reminiscent of *Jaws* was all the rage.

In *Primate*, college student Lucy (Johnny Sequoyah) returns home to her luxurious, seaside family home in Hawaii, but what should have been a fun time with her friends and a reunion with her father Adam (Troy Kotsur) and sister Erin (Gia Hunter) suddenly turns into a frantic fight for survival when the family's beloved pet, a chimpanzee named Ben, turns into a raging, blood-thirsty monster after being bitten by a rabid mongoose (King's story, of course, was about good boy Cujo turning in to the very worst of boys after being bitten by a rabid bat).

What follows is a campy survival horror, which slyly winks at the audience throughout, as it indulges a playfully mean streak when the terrified youngsters find themselves besieged by the titular ape. The film is being marketed as both gruesome and intense, but how engaging you find it will vary due to a number of factors.

It may be too much to ask of a campy creature feature, but considering there have been a number of well-documented real life incidents with pet chimpanzees mauling their owners, *Primate* does not quite go far enough, while Ben's rampage is somehow imbued with an abundance of thought and purposeful viciousness that seem too deliberate for a chimpanzee after it has contracted rabies – which arguably makes it difficult to sufficiently suspend disbelief.

This is not to say that *Primate* in any way needs to aim for accuracy, but for a vicious romp, it is simply not unhinged enough to satisfy gorehounds; there are a handful of fun set pieces, but if you are already acquainted with the likes of Art the Clown, Ben's efforts will seem rather tame for the work of an uncontrollable beast.

Credit where credit is due, though, as the reliance on practical effects over digital ones is very welcome for this type of creature feature, giving the film a degree of classic horror charm that plays well with the more tongue-in-cheek elements.

But while some fun can be had – especially if you miss your campy 80s horror and are not too fussed about the lack of narrative or character development – the most confounding part of the film is undoubtedly the mind-numbingly inept human characters, all of whom have the combined survival instinct of a soggy newspaper. There are moments where the stupidity of a couple of characters, clearly written that way on purpose, is rather amusing, especially if you are watching the film with a sizeable, interactive audience.

Primate has its moments, but it never seems to fully realise its potential to be truly terrifying; casual genre fans may find some amusement, but aficionados are unlikely to find much of interest here beyond the nostalgic notes the film manages to hit from time to time.

Leyla Mikkelsen

★★☆☆☆

We Bury the Dead

Dir Zak Hilditch, Australia/US 2025
On digital platforms, DVD & Blu-ray

The most ubiquitous sub-genre in horror is the zombie film and every time a new one pops up, which seems to be weekly, the hope is that something new is added to the mix. Writer-director Zak Hilditch does manage that to an extent, but there's not enough innovation to set this apart from the mass.

After an experimental weapon is accidentally deployed by the United States off the coast of Tasmania, everyone is killed immediately. The emergency services start a clean-up operation, but the scale of the task is so great that volunteers are invited to supplement official efforts. One such volunteer is American physio Ava (Daisy Ridley), who has travelled to the island ostensibly to help, but secretly plans to slip away from the task at hand to find her estranged husband, who was in Tasmania when the disaster occurred. The reason she is keen to find him is that, inexplicably, some of the dead having been returning to life, or at least demonstrating that they retain some brain function.

That is the new ingredient which has been added. It's not much, but it does switch things around, with the zombies not necessarily being mindless flesh-eaters and, in any case, they only represent a fraction of the people killed. This twist does produce some effective sequences, albeit of a sombre tone. It's the kind of film that could be described as thoughtful, but the proportion of viewers who settle down to watch a zombie flick wanting 'thoughtful' as opposed to buckets o'blood is, I suspect, low.

Put it this way: if there were no zombie action at all, the film wouldn't be worth watching, but if Hilditch had decided to simply give us wall-to-wall horror, it still just about would be. I say that because he clearly knows what he's doing behind the camera: the photography is beautiful – not just the landscapes, but also the interiors; the pacing is good; and he maintains a certain amount of tension. The performances aren't bad, but they are low key to the point of disinterest, so it's mostly uninvolving and the dialogue is perfunctory; two or three times the film grinds almost to a halt for scenes of exposition.

I applaud the effort to try something new in a tired genre, but Hilditch isn't quite bold enough to see his ideas all the way through and the result is a film that won't wholly satisfy either horror fans or viewers in search of something new.

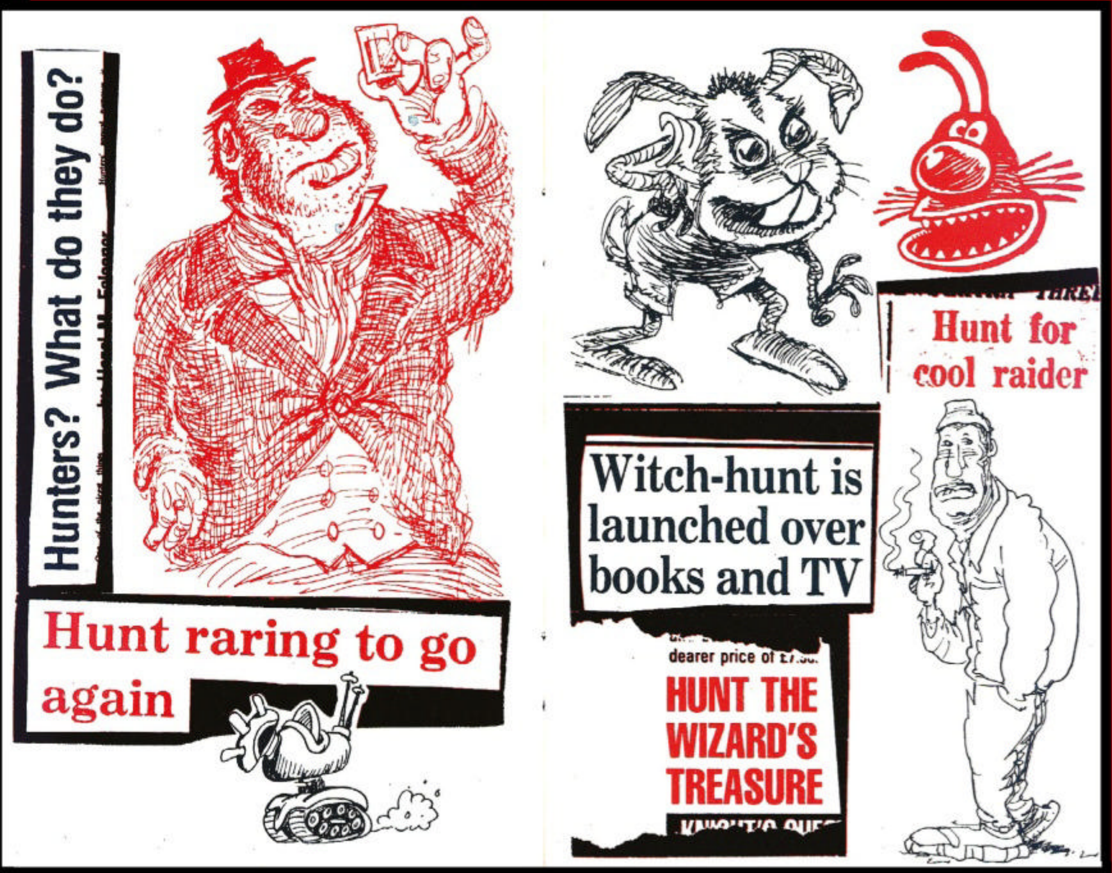
Daniel King

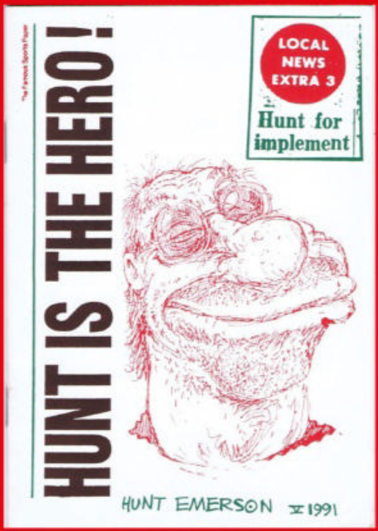
★★☆☆☆

LARGECOW COMIX

LARGECOW
the Online Shop for HUNT EMERSON

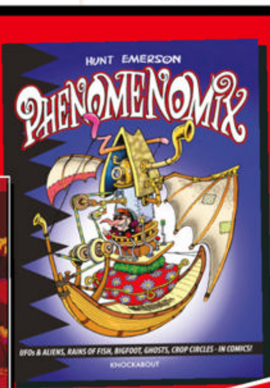
BOOKS, PRINTS AND ARTWORK


Hunters? What do they do?
Hunt raring to go again
Witch-hunt is launched over books and TV
dearer price of £7.50
HUNT THE WIZARD'S TREASURE
Hunt for cool raider

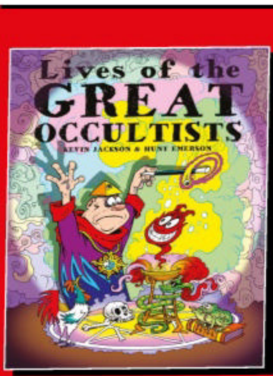

HUNT IS THE HERO!
LOCAL NEWS EXTRA 3
Hunt for implement
HUNT EMERSON 1991

HUNT IS THE HERO!
16 page Microcomic. 4" x 6". 1991.
COLLECTOR'S ITEM!!!!
The Arts Lab Press published a series of limited edition Microcomix in the early 1990s. They were printed in two colours, on crisp white stock. Very cute! I made three; this is one of them, made of coincidental newspaper clippings and sketchbook doodles. See here the cover and a sample spread.
I have 5 copies only of this in mint condition. After that - all gone!
£20-00

PHENOMENOMIX
Collecting most of my pages from Fortean Times. ***£22.99***

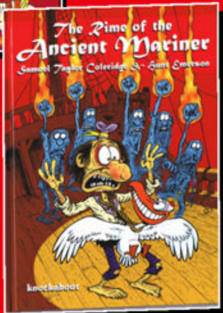

HUNT EMERSON
PHENOMENOMIX
UFOs & ALIENS, RAINS OF FISH, BIGFOOT, GHOSTS, CROP CIRCLES - IN COMICS!
KNOCKABOUT

LIVES OF THE GREAT OCCULTISTS
120 pages in colour,
Over 40 Occultists from Dr. Dee to - repeatedly - Aleister Crowley.
£12.99


Lives of the GREAT OCCULTISTS
KEVIN JACKSON & HUNT EMERSON

DANTE'S INFERNO
The noble and mysterious 14th Century poem by Dante Alighieri made hilarious by Emerson and Jackson. ***£11.99***

Dante's INFERNO
Hunt Emerson with Kevin Jackson
KNOCKABOUT


The Rime of the Ancient Mariner
Samuel Taylor Coleridge & Hunt Emerson
knockabout

THE RIME OF THE ANCIENT MARINER
The great narrative ballad by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, rendered as a comic book full of awful puns. ***£11.99***

NEWTON - ALCHEMIST

GREAT OCCULTISTS
Four A3 size signed prints.
£25.00

My comic books are all available in my Largecow Shop, along with artwork pages, t-shirts, prints and some

WWW.LARGECOW.COM

*ALL BOOKS ARE SIGNED! *MANY HAVE SKETCHES! *PERSONAL DEDICATIONS ARRANGED! *FREE STICKERS ETC. USUALLY INCLUDED!!

LETTERS

CONTACT US BY POST: PO BOX 1200, WHITSTABLE CT1 9RH, OR E-MAIL SIEVEKING@FORTEANTIMES.COM
PLEASE PROVIDE US WITH YOUR POSTAL ADDRESS

Night Visions

I found Ben Timberlake's article [**FT465:38-41**] about seeing gnome-like entities through a military night-vision sight rather interesting. Ben puts forward a theory about spores from fungi being a contributory factory to causing distortion and illusion in the visual field. Who knows? This may well be the case.

Sometime ago, certainly in the last year, I recall viewing on a YouTube channel that an American Vietnam vet claimed that similar occurrences to those described by Ben were not uncommon when using night-vision sights and that this was a subject of discussion among his fellow combatants. It would be interesting to hear from American readers if they have come across this type of experience while serving in the military.

Of course it might be me suffering from the Mandela effect…

Mick Duffy
St Ives, Cambridgeshire

Adamski Anomaly

Regarding Andy Owens's letter on the unsolved death of Zygmund Adamski [**FT465:67, 69**], there is another factor to be considered besides the unidentifiable substance found on him. It has been suggested that Adamski was involved in some type of espionage activity during the Cold War, for which side I do not know, and maybe fell foul of one side or the other, his mysterious death being orchestrated to make it look like a botched UFO abduction.

Martin Blackburn
Featherstone, West Yorkshire

Thoughts on FT465

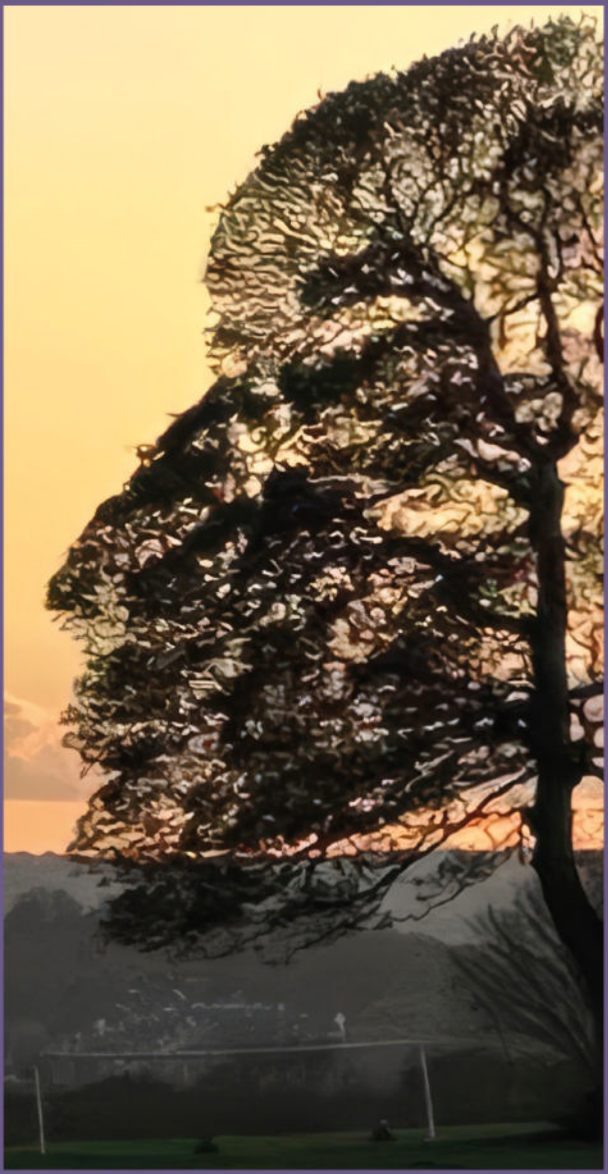
Dave Miles's letter [**FT465:65**] about conscious, controlled waking and slipping into an unconscious, sleeping state, reminded me of the ability some people have, including me, of being able to turn over a watch at a distinctive time like 11.11 and 11 seconds. It also made me wonder if dying being an unconscious act might explain cases of people not knowing that they had died, as in the case mentioned in an article about road ghosts a few years back, where a man was seen for several days after, looking for his crashed van.

With regards to Janet Bord and the Newby church ghost [**FT465:66-67**], the Reverend Lord's saying that he didn't notice anything at the time sounds like some UFO photos, where nothing is noticed either until the film is developed.

Lastly, Bob Rickard's review of Kristof Smeyers book on stigmata [**FT465:57**]: it doesn't 'mean' anything and it's not 'complicated'. It's either faked for attention-seeking purposes or genuine mind over matter. The pattern this takes physically on the body is just an imitation of mediæval depictions of the crucifixion – genuine ones involved an X-shaped cross and not a 'T', and nails went through the wrists and ankles, not the palms and feet – and might be better explained as self-harm or flagellation with psychic whips.

Tony Sandy
By email

SIMULACRA CORNER



Clare Robinson saw this striking face in profile while on a recent walk in Sheffield's Graves Park.

We are always glad to receive pictures of spontaneous forms and figures, or any curious images. Send them (with your postal address) to **Fortean Times, PO Box 1200, Whitstable CT1 9RH** or to **sieveking@forteantimes.com**

Death from above

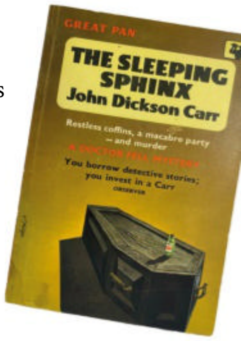
I can possibly shed some light on your article 'Death from above' [**FT465:9**]. Many years ago I heard that certain persons of a sadistic bent would conceal calcium carbide chips in pieces of bread or other food and feed them to seagulls. On coming into contact with moisture in the birds' alimentary tract the calcium carbide would release acetylene gas, developing sufficient pressure to rupture the gizzard, causing the birds to crash and die. I gather that this was a popular jape at naval parades, causing havoc when the gleaming white uniforms became covered with blood and excrement. (Do not on any account try this at home – a prosecution for animal cruelty would very likely follow.)

A note for younger readers: carbide chips were used for many years to fuel acetylene lamps for use on vehicles, especially bicycles.

Brian Perry,
Chilton Polden, Somerset

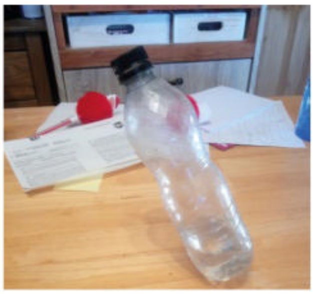
Yet More Moving Coffins

To Ulrich Magin's list of moving coffins in ghost lore and fiction [**FT466:61**], I would add "The Sleeping Sphinx" by John Dickson Carr (published in 1947) featuring his celebrated detective Dr Gideon Fell, and a vault in the Wiltshire countryside.


GREAT PAN
THE SLEEPING SPHINX
John Dickson Carr
Restless coffins, a macabre party – and murder
You borrow detective stories; you invest in a Carr
OBSERVER

Roger Musson
By email

LETTERS



South Shields Controversy

Having read the article concerning the 'South Shields Poltergeist' [**FT465:30-37**], I would make a couple of observations. It is unsurprising that the featured image is 'controversial'. My house has (or at least had) a poltergeist, but it never saw fit to engage in schoolboy parlour tricks such as this. The trick is to find the centre of mass of the object in question, then use something inconspicuous to help support it at its balance point. A sufficiently skilled person will balance the container in a small pile of fine sand or table salt, then carefully blow away the excess, leaving what looks like an 'impossible' balancing act even when closely observed. See the image above for my own version. Also, I must really take issue with the suggestion that the 'latent' electricity in devices connected to the mains is able to 'recharge' a poltergeist or anything else. The only energy source present is the electromagnetic flux created by the mains supply, which being AC, is shifting between + and -240v at 50 cycles per second. The field this generates in a house is pitifully weak, and in any case is present as long as the mains supply is connected, irrespective of whether the sockets are switched on or the kettle is plugged in. I am for some reason reminded of my grandmother's belief that sockets needed to be covered, lest the electricity 'leak out' and go to waste...

Ian I'Anson
By email

Joe Nickell nicked

The largely laudatory obit **[FT461:22-23]** for Joe Nickell, America's professional 'skeptic' and "CSICOP private eye", warrants a rejoinder.

Joe could be, often was, charming; a competent self-labelled "Detective of the Impossible" who promoted critical thinking; a persuasive wordsmith who threatened to sue anyone – this writer included, he warned – who might call him a debunker; a contumelious (sometimes humorously) persecutor of "the efforts of non-scientist authors and journalists" – his words – who dared promulgate preposterous claims about imagined weirdness.

He could also be arrogant; condescending; a claimant for investigations he did not do; a person to be counted among – again, his words – contemptuous "people whose minds have been made up prior to inquiry."

Unlike many who posthumously praised him in *Skeptical Inquirer* (July/August 2025) and interacted but briefly if at all with him, our relationship with Mr Nickell spanned five decades of correspondence, phone calls, publications, and television appearances. It's an unflattering history that we detailed to *Skeptical Inquirer* soon after his death. Its editor-in-chief, Stephen Hupp, Ph.D, twice refused to print that history because, he wrote, "it would be in poor taste for us to publish a critique of one of our columnists."

As Charles Fort noted in *Wild Talents*: "The proper authority saw to it that the proper belief should be induced, and the people believed properly."

Nickell was not always "a fair-minded investigator" as the Necrolog entry states. That he "carefully chose to draw the line at what was measurable and demonstrative" was not always true. Two examples will suffice.

First, the 1966 localised blaze that consumed John Irving Bentley [see **FT460:32-34**].

Nickell repeatedly wrote – bragged, one can argue – that he investigated 30 cases alleged to be spontaneous human combustion, Bentley's among them. However, in a letter hand-written to us a year before his death he conceded the "evidence reported" by him was *not* from his investigation into Doc Bentley but from the ones *we* did. So, he co-opted another's research to present as his own.

Yet Nickell professed he "knew" how Doctor Bentley burned up: not by SHC, of course, but by "hot ashes from his pipe *for sure!*" This certainty required an eyewitness. We respectfully asked Joe to identify his anonymous source and how he found him/her when we could not.

"I didn't, of course, have the 'eyewitness' you sarcastically imagine in your familiar caricature manner," Joe retorted. How, then, can the 'skeptic' know "*for sure!*" what happened?

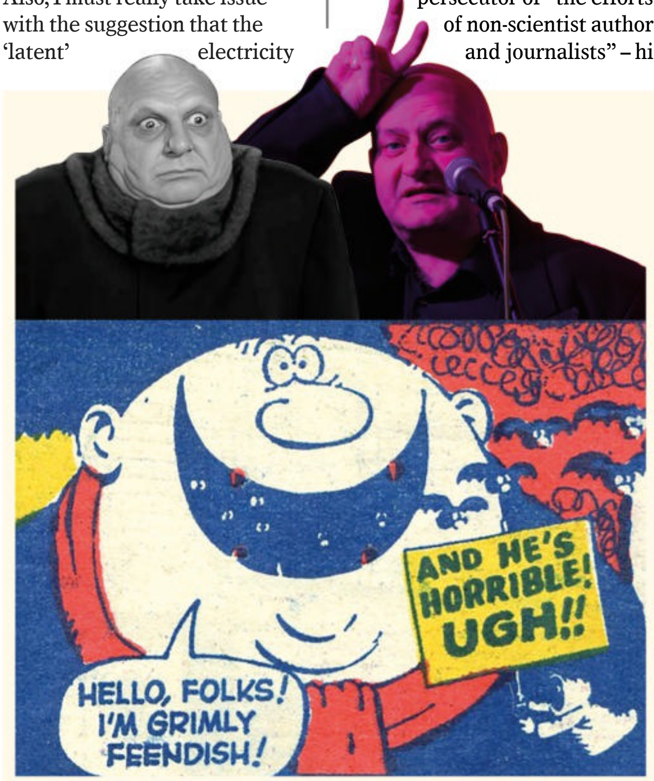
This was another example of his "just suppose" go-to technique to solve fortean anomalies: suppose a speculation, declare it fact and, ergo, mystery will vaporise like fog under a rising sun.

Because we refused to accept his speculations – demonstrable falsehoods – about Bentley, Nickell gleefully and repeatedly impugned us a "mystery monger" and low-IQ school bus driver – his snarky zinger for someone he deemed lacked the intelligence to handle a more demanding job. (Drive a school bus for half-a-century, as we have, then talk to us about a demanding job.)

"He hates you. He *really* hates you!" an associate revealingly told us after mentioning our name to him. Arguing real versus fabricated evidence warrants hatred and name-calling?

Second, the 1967 fatal fire of Robert Bailey.

A television programme paired Joe and myself as, respectively, anti-SHC prosecutor and SHC defender. To defend SHC we chose the case of Bailey, seen by Lambeth (London) fire brigade officer Jack Stacy and his crew to spew blue flame "jetting with force" from within his abdomen in the absence of external ignition. We did a lengthy sit-down with Stacey, a command officer with


AND HE'S HORRIBLE! UGH!!
HELLO, FOLKS! I'M GRIMLY FEENDISH!

Uncle Fester vs Grimly Feendish

My thanks to the lovely Ruth Morris for comparing me to Uncle Fester in her write-up of the 2025 Strange Days Festival [**FT465:14-15**]. I always thought *The Munsters* was a cut above *The Addams Family* myself. I think I actually look more like the legendary comics creator Leo Baxendale's character 'Grimly Feendish, the Rottenest Crook in the World', who appeared in *Wham*, *Smash*, *Shiver and Shake* and *Monster Fun*.

As a footnote (pun intended), at the festival a Tasmanian bone collector outbid me in an auction for the preserved foot of a 19th century French priest. Now that's something that doesn't happen every day of the week!

Richard Freeman *Exeter, Devon*

more than two decades of fire-fighting expertise. We found the fire officer credible, knowledgeable, profoundly perplexed by this singular fire call,; and willing to embrace SHC as what he and his fire-fighters saw.

Nickell's self-righteous prosecutorial counter: no way could this be SHC because Fire Brigade Commander Stacey (to whom he never spoke) was *unqualified* to competently assess a fire scene and, therefore, his testimony is discredited. Really?

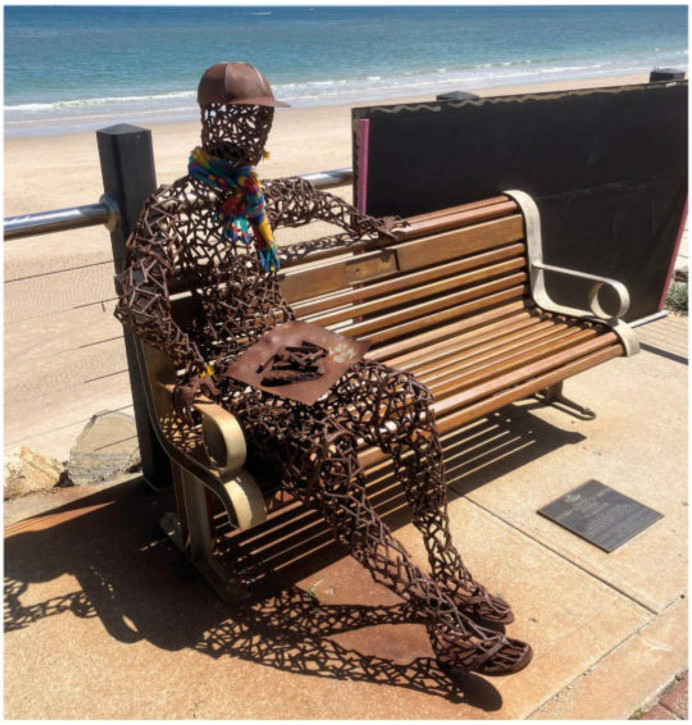
Making up 'facts' about what one does not know is pseudoscience, the very thing Nickell railed against during his legendary career. His achievements notwithstanding, at times Joe Nickell was a 'skeptical' fraud. Does that define debunker? You decide.

Larry E Arnold
Harrisburg, Pennsylvania

Somerton Man

Given the recent possible identification of the Somerton Man [**FT351:30-35, 423:4-5**], in 2022 I walked Somerton beach seeking to locate the spot where the body was found propped up against a seawall. The seawall has been demolished and rebuilt since 1948 and no actual memorial marks the spot, but interestingly a piece of public art now sits atop the wall at the junction of Ferris Ave and the Esplanade below which the body was found. The 'Person Sitting on Bench' sculpture is locally called the 'Fish and Chip Man', but one can't help but wonder if the sculpture is not a silent nod to the Somerton Man.

Dr Stephen Muller
Adelaide, South Australia

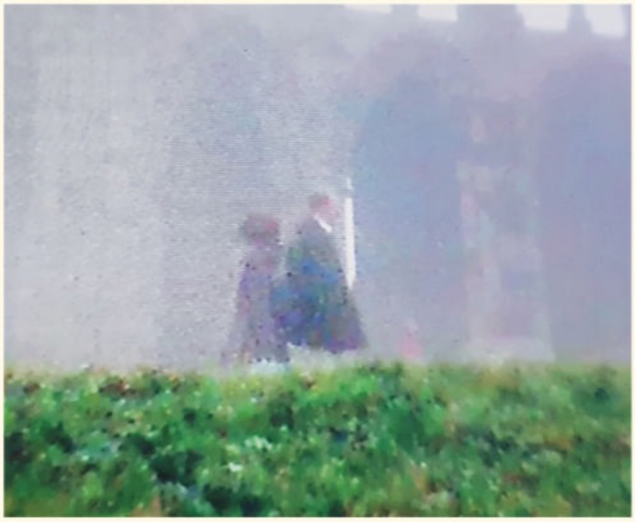


More on the Newby Church Ghost

As the originator of the current correspondence [**FT453:67**] I hope I may be allowed some comments – one in favour of Revd KF Lord, and one against; take your pick!

The Revd Lord states [see Janet Bord's letter, **FT465:66-67**] that the camera was hand-held – this is vital because any double exposure theory would require a tripod. Frankly, this is almost unbelievable; the photograph shows no trace of hand shake for what must have been a longish exposure. He goes into great detail to justify this, describing the great west rose window as providing plenty of light at 6pm in July/August for the Rolleiflex IV with "slowish" film, Ilford FP2. He must actually mean FP3, as FP2 was replaced by it in 1946. FP3 had an ASA rating of 125, which is certainly slow by modern standards (Kodak Tri X was 400). The Rolleiflex IV has a helpful exposure chart on the back which suggests for ASA100, August, Light Interior, f3.5 1/50sec to f16 1/2sec. I would think, even with the rose window, the church would be darker than this – the altar clearly isn't in direct stained glass light. It is generally suggested one has to use a tripod below 1/125sec; hand-holding at 1/50sec would inevitably show hand shake, and a twin lens reflex is a large, heavy camera. I pointed out the frame shape was square, and that therefore the photograph had been cropped top and bottom, not because I thought this was unusual (as Janet Bord points out, this was common practice), but only because it was just conceivable that the lost bottom half might contain some valuable clue. If Revd Lord was lying about hand-holding the camera then he was certainly complicit in the appearance of the 'ghost'.

On the other hand: There is a *second* 'ghost' in the picture that no one has noticed. Look at the left hand end of the altar, the 'ghost' picture on the left, a modern picture on the right. There is a clear face peeping out from behind the reredos where there is no stain on the wall, and a leg at floor level.



Whitby time slip?

I am a clairvoyant medium of 35 years' professional experience and a regular reader of your magazine.

Two ladies who know I am a medium showed me on their mobile phone a photograph their daughter had taken on a recent trip to Whitby Abbey. The daughter was with a friend at the time and I am assured they were the only people present at the abbey, or at least in the particular area they were in. They told me quite emphatically that no one was there – no historical reenactment, taking place, no drama being filmed and no goths, as could have been the case, it being Whitby Abbey.

So it would seem to be two ghosts or spirits from a time slip or whatever you might call it. The man looks to me like a vicar or priest and the women seems wealthily dressed. I note there are no feet (maybe obscured by the grass). Also, in the distance to the right of the man (with receding hairline), there appears what could be a figure in red or deep pink. The colours between the archway on the right of the figures can appear iridescent when viewed in certain light.

I have seen any number of ghost photographs and spirits over the years, but this is one of the most impressive. The persons involved have no real interest in the paranormal as such and nothing to gain from fantasy or deception, to them it was an unexpected curiosity. What do readers think?

Ms AJ Vinegrad
Beverley, Yorkshire

It Happened to Me...

Readers write in with their own accounts of strange phenomena

Bilateral consciousness

Somewhen back in the 1980s, I was sitting on the couch in my living room smoking weed and watching TV around 11 in the morning. Nothing unusual. (I had been toking for roughly 20 years by then.)

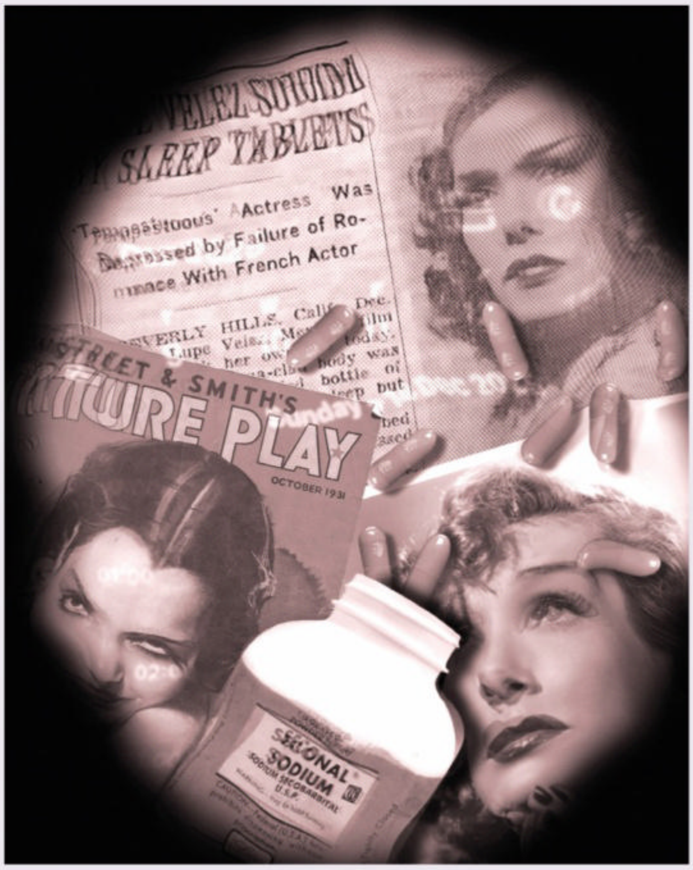
A commercial came on, so I decided to get up and go to the bathroom. I rose and crossed the room to the threshold. Nothing unusual.

For some reason, I glanced back to the couch – and unusual it was. Sitting exactly where I had been sitting was... me! He/I was still quietly watching TV, but then he glanced up and our eyes met. The me on the threshold smiled and waved. In response, he just looked back at the screen. He had remained expressionless throughout.

I left the room, feeling unexpectedly ecstatic. Waves of happiness rolled through me and I laughed gleefully. For the few seconds that it had lasted, I not only experienced bilocation, but bilateral and simultaneous consciousness! "I" had inhabited both bodies. Each of us had looked at the other self. One self had felt the floor underneath his feet. The other self had felt the sofa he was seated on.

If I remember correctly, the extremely joyful mood lasted at least for another hour before fading slowly away. Prior to this occurrence, I had been very worried about my mortality. But an effect of this "gnosis", acquired as a result of this experience, showed me I could exist and think in more than one body at the same time. I also now "knew" that we all would continue on in even more concentrations of life yet unexperienced. The only other odd event I have noted in my life is with mirrors. Within the last few years, I have been able to "catch" my eyes looking where I had *just* been looking before looking into the mirror. The timing seems to be a bit off. Have any of you had similar experiences?

Craig Ross,
Rhode Island, USA



The Mexican actress Lupe Vélez killed herself with an overdose of Secobarbital on 14 December 1944

Christmas Vardøger?

I think I may have experienced the Scandinavian phenomenon of Vardøger, where a person appears to arrive before they actually do [see **FT327:30-31**], one evening in December 2025.

My husband was down in London for the day with work, and wouldn't be back home until late. I had dinner with our three-year-old son, bathed him and put him to bed. I then went to bed myself shortly before 9.30pm. As I lay there with my eyes closed, I heard what might have been the door, but then distinctly heard my husband downstairs say, "Oh, he had the red one then." At first I didn't twig what he meant, but I then realised he was talking about the advent calendars. Our son had a simple chocolate advent calendar, which happened to be blue, while my husband had a more elaborate and grown-up red chocolate advent calendar, which our son coveted. If he had been very good that day, he was allowed to have Daddy's advent calendar after dinner. I then drifted off to sleep, knowing my husband was downstairs.

The next morning, I was chatting with my husband in the kitchen about his day in London and I mentioned that I'd heard him arrive home. It turned out that not only had he *not* arrived home until about 11pm, long after I'd gone to bed, but he definitely hadn't spoken out loud, so as not to wake me or our son.

I can only assume that I conjured up an auditory hallucination of my husband's voice in that moment of drifting off to sleep. I've previously experienced phantom crying, where you are convinced you can hear your baby crying when they're not, in the middle of the night when our son was very little. Although that did result in a night of my husband and I checking our son's bedroom over and over, only to find him sound asleep, it wasn't as distinct and vivid as this occasion. Perhaps it was a bit of Christmas magic.

Jasmine Parkinson
Altrincham, Manchester

Podcast Synchronicity

I'm writing in with a story of a strange coincidence that happened to me. I was listening to the podcast *In Our Time*, in particular the episode about Pauli's Exclusion Principle. For some reason the podcast stopped playing. When I managed to get it to start again one of the speakers said "1924". At that exact moment the podcast was 19 minutes 24 seconds through – 19:24!

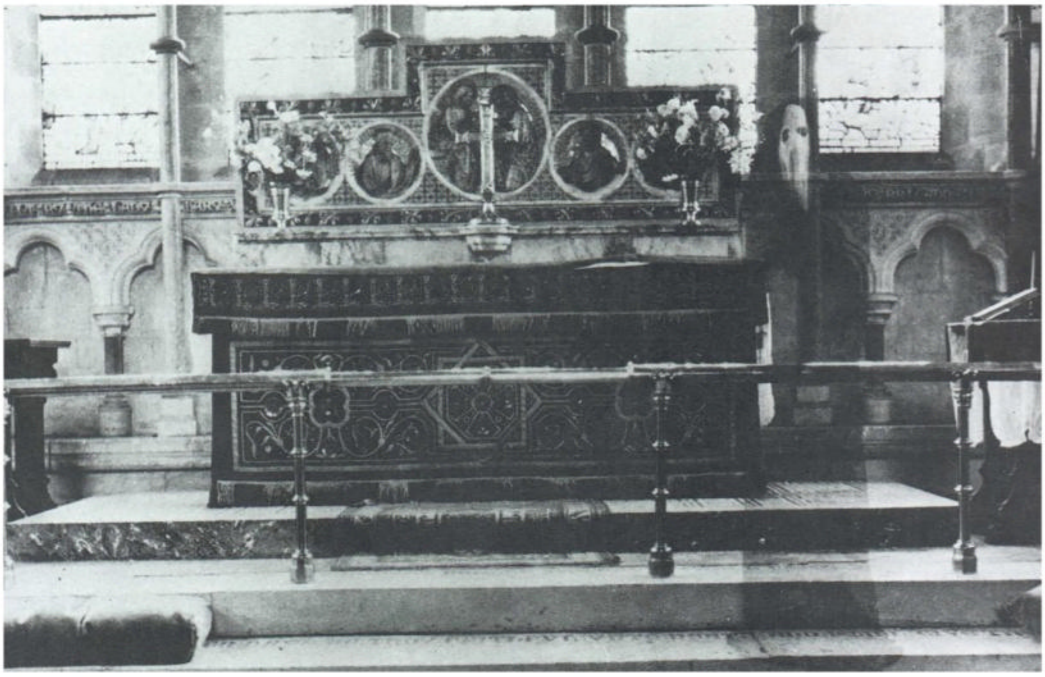
Needless to say, I found this quite surprising. Given that Pauli had corresponded with Jung, this minor bit of synchronicity seemed quite cool! Here's a link to the podcast: https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/paulis-exclusion-principle-archive-episode/id73330895?i=1000735259782

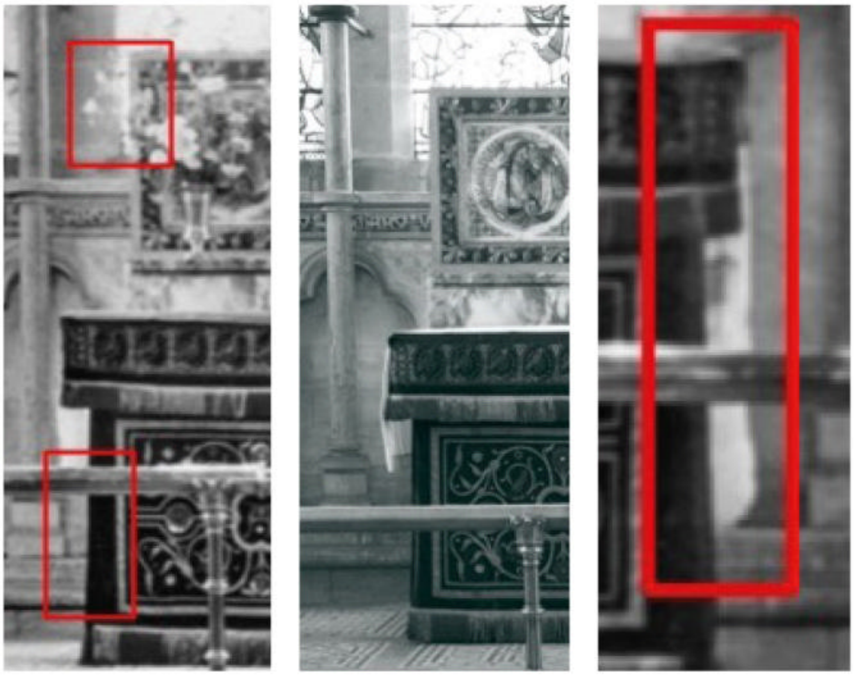
Partha Lal
By email

Insomnia coincidence

While in a charity shop on 11 December 2025, I discovered a DVD of two 1930s Tarzan films, both starring Johnny Weissmuller. Between about 10pm on the night of 13 December and the early hours of 14 December I watched both films. Around 3am on 14 December, unable to sleep due to my insomnia, I googled Johnny Weissmuller and discovered he had been married to the Mexican actress Lupe Vélez, who killed herself with an overdose of the anti-insomnia drug Secobarbital in the early hours of 14 December 1944.

Stefan Badham
Portsmouth, Hampshire





The 'ghost' picture is a double exposure and has caught someone hiding behind the altar as well as the 'ghost'. There is plenty of space behind the altar; unusually, it is proud of the rear wall by about three feet. Which prompts me to look at the right hand side. What is that white thing poking out from behind the altar? It is not a white drape hanging down: you can clearly see the altar top is dark. There is something or somebody hiding behind the altar.

If they are hiding, they don't want Revd Lord to see them, so they are up to no good – like assembling the 'ghost' from a coat hanger on a hat stand concealed behind the altar while an accomplice (the 'friend') has distracted him before he can wind the camera (on a tripod) on; then they take a second exposure, dissemble the ghost and retreat behind the altar as he and his 'friend' come back. He was a newly ordained vicar in his first parish – there is nothing the locals down the public bar like better that joshing the new vicar. There is no way anyone, Kodak Labs or Home Office number plate recognition research, can detect a double exposure in the camera provided it doesn't move between exposures – the negative is physically identical to a single exposure.

Roger J Morgan
London

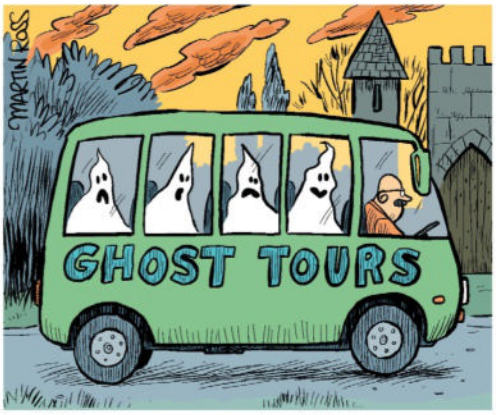
As I read Janet Bord's letter about the Newby Church Ghost [**FT465:65-66**] I thought about the comment that the church's Western window is "enormous" and "placed high in the lofty wall" and that "there was a good deal of light" – interesting, and it made me think about light through stained glass windows.

I used to worship in the Anglican Cathedral in Adelaide in South Australia and the summer sunlight there is very strong. At certain times of the year the sunlight comes through the North aisle's stained-glass windows (most of which are Victorian) and I noticed that when there was incense in the air the smoke was lit up and coloured. At other times the sunlight coming through the northern windows threw coloured light onto the light-coloured floor of the south aisle and the lower parts of the limestone wall. The light was not clear enough to make out figures, but it was bright and quite definite, although you had to be standing in the right place to see them or even notice them as you walked past.

If it could be worked out what time of the year the photographs of the church were taken it might be possible to work out what part of the Western window was lit up. Or maybe a study could be made of it to see if there is a section where the light might throw an image onto the sanctuary. There also might be more emphasis on the figure when photographs are taken in black and white instead of colour, as happened when black and white photographs of the Turin Shroud (especially in negatives) showed up the marks more clearly. It might be that the reason the photograph was not printed was because the Revd Lord forgot that there had been a patch of sunlight, but sort of noticed that there was a blur on the negative.

I don't know enough about light, cameras and film to say for certain that this might be an explanation for the ghost image, but perhaps somebody with such interests might like to investigate the possibility. I think that if it was proved that the ghost was caused by light through coloured glass being photographed in black and white that would be a most interesting phenomenon and could lead to more investigations of wonderful things caused by light and colour.

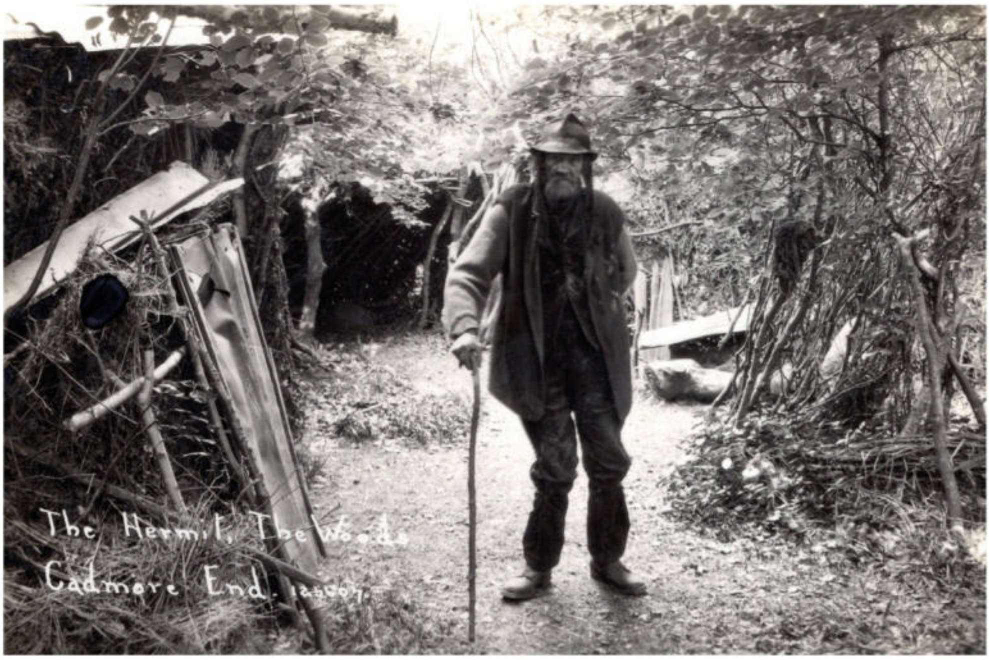
Margaret Pitcher
Canberra, Australia

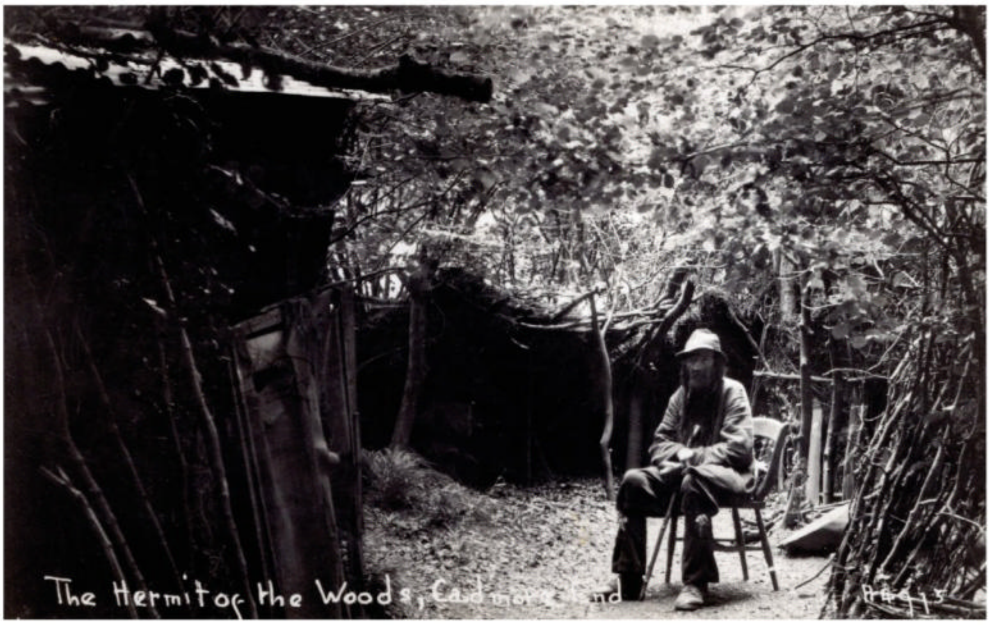


PECULIAR POSTCARDS

JAN BONDESON shares another deltiological discovery from his prodigious collection of postcards. This month's pictorial blast from the past records the long life of a Buckinghamshire hermit with mistaken intimations of immortality

58. THE HERMIT OF CADMORE END




The Hermit of the Woods, Cadmore End

Jack Butler was born in Cadmore End, Buckinghamshire, in or around 1848. His grandmother took care of him and made sure he attended the local school. Jack had no liking for academic pursuits, however, preferring to earn his keep doing odd jobs, one of which was the tying up of bundles of firewood; it was hardly the most intellectually demanding of occupations, but Jack seems to have liked it. After his grandmother died, Jack moved to a woodland hermitage he had constructed himself, made of tree-boughs, dried leaves and corrugated iron sheets. As time went by, he became quite a local character, with waist-long hair and a pilgrim's staff.

In 1906, when he was around 58 years old, Jack retired from the firewood company, deciding to become a full-time hermit. He sat in his hermitage, where he sometimes received visitors who wanted to see him as a curiosity. At least two postcards were published to promote his freak show career: they show the slightly sinister-looking old hermit appearing dirty and bedraggled. It was considered good manners to tip Jack a shilling or two after listening to his confused utterances. Jack was not as other men, he pontificated: he was a prophet with a mission in life, and would never die. After he had reached 65, the kind locals brought his old age pension to the hermitage, and often some treats and luxuries as well, for the confused old man to enjoy. During the cold nights, Jack sat crouched by his camp-fire, scribbling endlessly on scraps of paper.

But despite his own prediction, the Hermit of Cadmore End was not destined for immortality. On 14 January 1936, when Jack was 88 years old, he was found very ill inside his hermitage. Dr G Nunn, of Lane End, was called in, but the hermit died the following day, from a cerebral hæmorrhage, arteriosclerosis and senile decay according to his death certificate. His brief obituary was published in the *Daily Herald* and the *Daily Mail*, and there was a short 2019 article about him in the *Bucks Free Press*. His postcards mostly sold locally and are scarce today as a result.

READER INFO

HOW TO SUBSCRIBE

UK: DD Subscription 6 issues £29.95, 1 year 13 issues £55.95; Europe/USA/CAN, 1 year 13 issues £71.95/ROW £79.95. Please see house ads in the latest issue for details of special offers.

UK, EUROPE, NORTH AMERICA & REST OF WORLD

Major credit cards accepted. Cheques or money orders should be in sterling, preferably drawn on a London bank and made payable to Diamond Publishing Limited. Mail to: **Fortean Times**, Diamond Publishing Limited, 4th Floor, Harmsworth House, 13–15 Bouverie Street, London EC4Y 8DP. NB: This address should be used for orders and subscriptions only.

Telephone payments and queries: +44 (0) 208 752 8195.
E-mail payments and queries: hello@metropolis.co.uk

HOW TO SUBMIT

Fortean Times reserves all rights to reuse material submitted by *FT* readers and contributors in any medium or format.

ILLUSTRATIONS

Contact the art director by email (etienne@forteantimes.com) before sending samples of work. We cannot guarantee to respond to unsolicited work, though every effort will be made to do so.

ARTICLE SUBMISSIONS

Please send all submissions or ideas for articles to David Sutton, Editor, Fortean Times by email: drsutton@forteantimes.com. As we receive a large volume of submissions, a decision may not be immediate.

LETTERS

Letters of comment or about experiences are welcome. Send to PO Box 1200, Whitstable, CT1 9RH, UK or email sieveking@forteantimes.com. We reserve the right to edit submissions.

BOOKS, PERIODICALS AND REVIEW MATERIAL

Contact the reviews editor at: dvbarrett@forteantimes.com

CAVEAT

FT aims to present the widest range of interpretations to stimulate discussion and welcomes helpful criticism. The opinions of contributors are not necessarily those of the editors. *FT* can take no responsibility for submissions, but will take all reasonable care of material in its possession. Requests for return of material should be accompanied by a stamped addressed envelope or an International Reply Coupon.

We occasionally use material that has been placed in the public domain. It is not always possible to identify the copyright holder. If you claim credit for something we've published, we'll be pleased to make acknowledgement.

CLIPSTERS WANTED

Regular clipsters have provided the lifeblood of *Fortean Times* since it began in 1973. One of the delights for the editors is receiving packets of clips from Borneo or Brazil, Saudi Arabia or Siberia. We invite you to join in the fun and send in anything weird, from trade journals, local newspapers, extracts from obscure tomes, or library newspaper archives.

To minimise the time spent on preparing clippings for a Fort Sort, we ask that you cut them out and not fold them too small. Mark each clip (on the front, where possible) with the source, date and your name, so that we can credit you in the listing (right) when we use the material. For UK local and overseas clips, please give the town of publication. For foreign language clips, we appreciate brief translations. To avoid confusion over day and month, please write the date in this form: 1 MAR 2026. If you send photocopies, copy on one side of the paper only.

Mail to: Fortean Times, PO BOX 1200, WHITSTABLE, CT1 9RH
E-mail: news@forteantimes.com

WHY FORTEAN?

FORTEAN TIMES is a monthly magazine of news, reviews and research on strange phenomena and experiences, curiosities, prodigies and portents. It was founded by Bob Rickard in 1973 to continue the work of Charles Fort (1874–1932).

Born of Dutch stock in Albany, New York, Fort spent many years researching scientific literature in the New York Public Library and the British Museum Library. He marshalled his evidence and set forth his philosophy in *The Book of the Damned* (1919), *New Lands* (1923), *Lo!* (1931), and *Wild Talents* (1932).

He was sceptical of dogmatic scientific explanations, observing that some scientists tended to argue according to their personal beliefs rather than the rules of evidence and that inconvenient data were ignored, suppressed, discredited or explained away. He criticised modern science for its reductionism, its attempts to define, divide and separate. Fort's dictum "One measures a circle beginning anywhere" expresses instead his philosophy of Continuity in which everything is in an intermediate and transient state between extremes.

He had ideas of the Universe-as-organism and the transient nature of all apparent phenomena, coined the term 'teleportation', and was perhaps the first to speculate that mysterious lights seen in the sky might be craft from outer space. However, he cut at the very roots of credulity: "I conceive of nothing, in religion, science or philosophy, that is more than the proper thing to wear, for a while."

Fort was by no means the first person to collect anomalies and oddities – such collections have abounded from Greece to China since ancient times. **Fortean Times** keeps alive this ancient task of dispassionate weird-watching, exploring the wild frontiers between the known and the unknown.

Besides being a journal of record, **FT** is also a forum for the discussion of observations and ideas, however absurd or unpopular, and maintains a position of benevolent scepticism towards both the orthodox and unorthodox. **FT** toes no party line.

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENTS

AUSTRALIA Graham Cordon (SA), Tony Healy (ACT), John Palazzi (NSW), Len Watson (Qld). **CANADA** Brian Chapman (BC), Graham Conway (BC). **CYBERSPACE** John F Callahan, Hugh Henry, Steve Scanlon, Janet Wilson. **ENGLAND** Gail-Nina Anderson, Louise Bath, James Beckett, Claire Blamey, Peter Christie, Mat Coward, Kate Eccles, Paul Farthing, George Featherston, Paul Gallagher, Alan Gardiner, Keith George, Anne Hardwick, Richard Lowke, Diana Lyons, Dave Malin, Nick Maloret, Tom Ruffles, Meryl Santis, Paul Screeton, Gary Stocker, Roman Suchyj, Frank Thomas, Paul Thomas, Owen Whiteoak, Bobby Zodiac. **FRANCE** Michel Meurger. **GERMANY** Ulrich Magin. **IRELAND** Andy Conlon, Pat Corcoran. **ISRAEL** Zvi Ron. **NEW ZEALAND** Peter Hassall. **SCOTLAND** Roger Musson. **SWEDEN** Sven Rosén. **THAILAND** Terry W Colvin. **USA** Loren Coleman (ME), Jim Conlan (CT), Myron Hoyt (ME), Greg May (FL), Jim Riecken (NY), Joseph Trainor (MA), Jeffrey Vallance (CA).

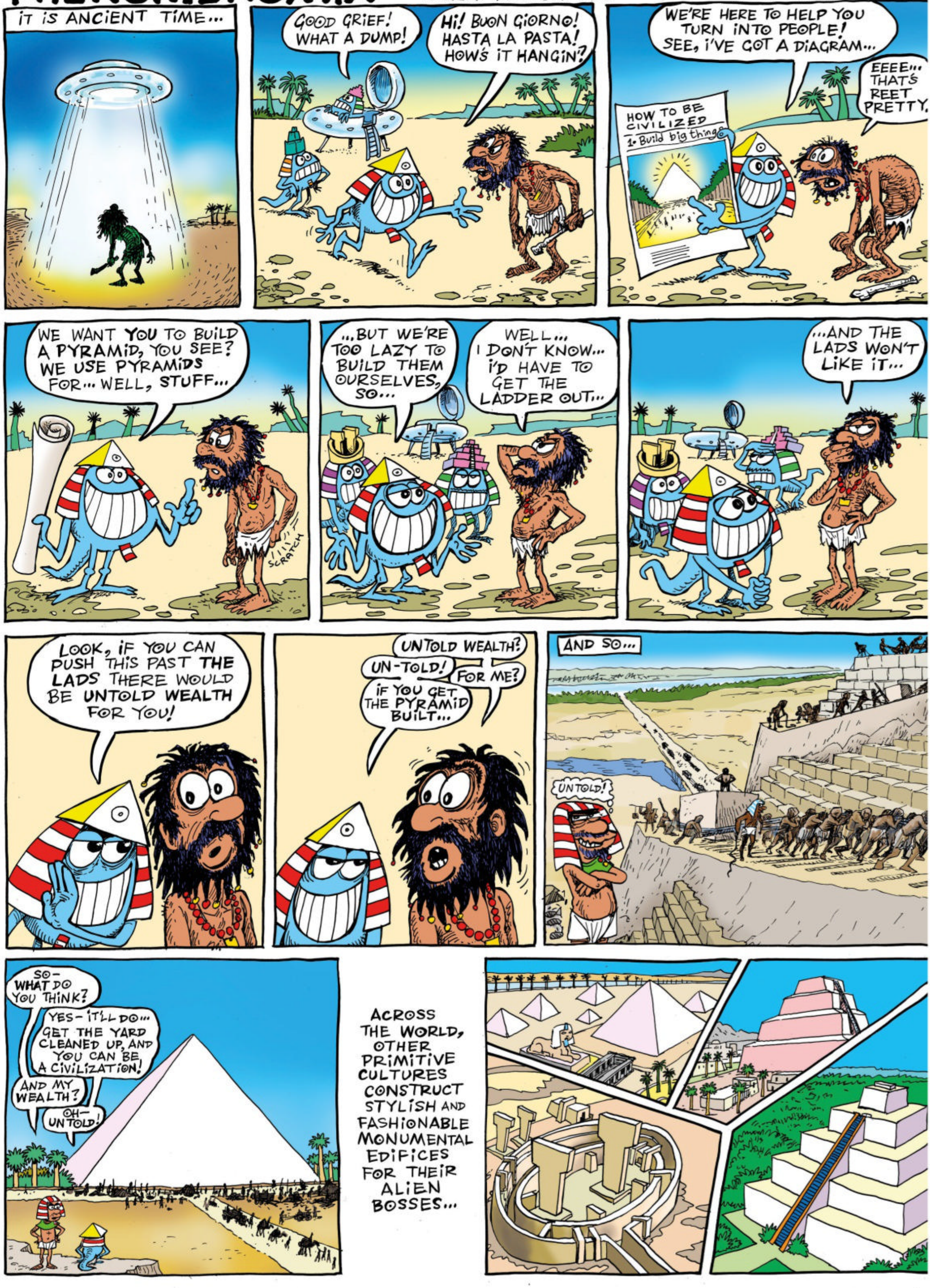
CLIPPING CREDITS FOR FT468

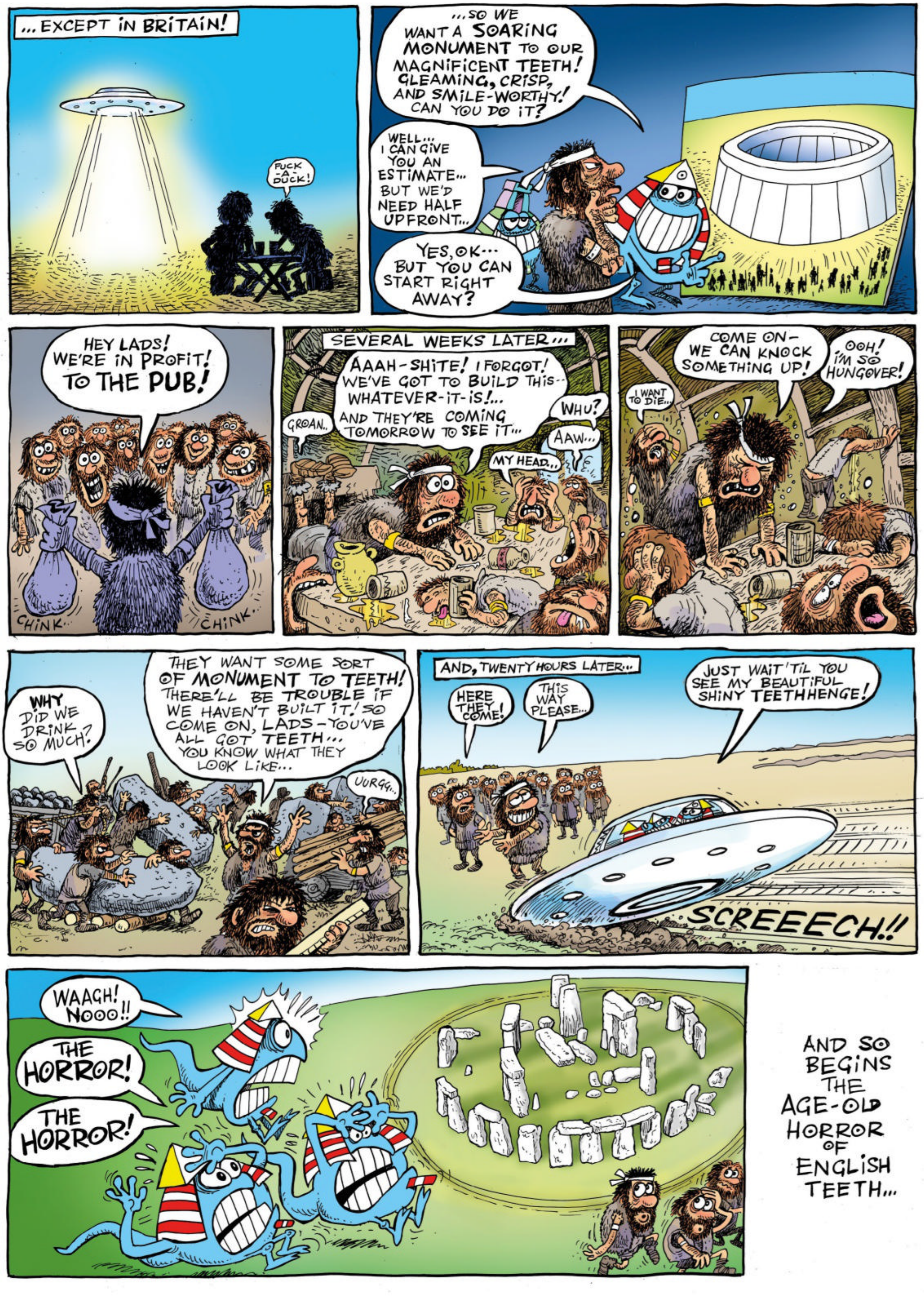
Gerard Apps, James Beckett, Lionel Beer, Kay Coggin, Terry Colvin, Andy Conlon, Pat Corcoran, Sam Dunn, John Evans, Alan Gardiner, Keith George, Jenny Green, David Hambling, Hugh Henry, Tony James, Robin Lee, Dave Malin, Nick Maloret, Lorna Stroup Nilsson, Jim Price, Tom Ruffles, Ryan Shirlow, Gary Stocker, Paul Street, Brett Taylor, Carole Tyrrell, Clive Watson, Len Watson, Nigel Watson, Tim Weinberg, Owen Whiteoak, Mark Williams, Janet Wilson, James Wright.

PHENOMENOMIX

ANCIENT ASTRONAUTS

HUNT EMERSON


IT IS ANCIENT TIME...
GOOD GRIEF! WHAT A DUMP!
HI! BUON GIORNO! HASTA LA PASTA! HOW'S IT HANGIN'?
WE'RE HERE TO HELP YOU TURN INTO PEOPLE! SEE, I'VE GOT A DIAGRAM...
HOW TO BE CIVILIZED
1• Build big things
EEEE... THAT'S REET PRETTY.
WE WANT YOU TO BUILD A PYRAMID, YOU SEE? WE USE PYRAMIDS FOR... WELL, STUFF...
SCRATCH
...BUT WE'RE TOO LAZY TO BUILD THEM OURSELVES, SO...
WELL... I DON'T KNOW... I'D HAVE TO GET THE LADDER OUT...
...AND THE LADS WON'T LIKE IT...
LOOK, IF YOU CAN PUSH THIS PAST THE LADS THERE WOULD BE UNTOLD WEALTH FOR YOU!
UNTOLD WEALTH?
UN-TOLD!
FOR ME?
IF YOU GET THE PYRAMID BUILT...
AND SO...
UNTOLD!
SO- WHAT DO YOU THINK?
YES- IT'LL DO... GET THE YARD CLEANED UP, AND YOU CAN BE A CIVILIZATION!
AND MY WEALTH?
OH- UNTOLD!
ACROSS THE WORLD, OTHER PRIMITIVE CULTURES CONSTRUCT STYLISH AND FASHIONABLE MONUMENTAL EDIFICES FOR THEIR ALIEN BOSSES...


... EXCEPT IN BRITAIN!
FUCK -A- DUCK!
...SO WE WANT A SOARING MONUMENT TO OUR MAGNIFICENT TEETH! GLEAMING, CRISP, AND SMILE-WORTHY! CAN YOU DO IT?
WELL... I CAN GIVE YOU AN ESTIMATE... BUT WE'D NEED HALF UPFRONT...
YES, OK... BUT YOU CAN START RIGHT AWAY?
HEY LADS! WE'RE IN PROFIT! TO THE PUB!
CHINK...
CHINK...
SEVERAL WEEKS LATER...
AAAH-SHITE! I FORGOT! WE'VE GOT TO BUILD THIS--WHATEVER-IT-IS!... AND THEY'RE COMING TOMORROW TO SEE IT...
GROAN..
WHU?
AAW...
MY HEAD...
COME ON- WE CAN KNOCK SOMETHING UP!
OOH! I'M SO HUNGOVER!
I WANT TO DIE...
WHY DID WE DRINK SO MUCH?
THEY WANT SOME SORT OF MONUMENT TO TEETH! THERE'LL BE TROUBLE IF WE HAVEN'T BUILT IT! SO COME ON, LADS - YOU'VE ALL GOT TEETH... YOU KNOW WHAT THEY LOOK LIKE...
UURGG...
AND, TWENTY HOURS LATER...
HERE THEY COME!
THIS WAY PLEASE...
JUST WAIT 'TIL YOU SEE MY BEAUTIFUL SHINY TEETHHENGE!
SCREEECH!!
WAAGH! NOOO!!
THE HORROR!
THE HORROR!

AND SO BEGINS THE AGE-OLD HORROR OF ENGLISH TEETH...

Coming Next Month

FINDING BIGFOOTERS

MONSTER HUNTERS AND CITIZEN SCIENCE

SEVENTIES PSI SQUAD

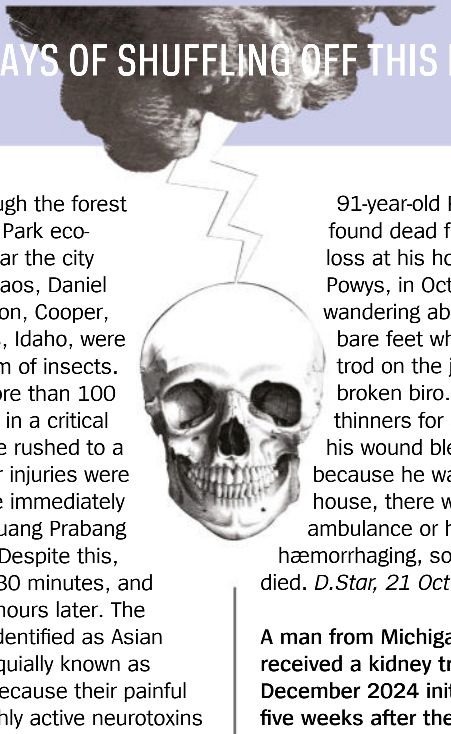
BEVY JAEGERS AND HER PSYCHIC DETECTIVES

+ PIXY PROTECTORS,
UFOS AND NUKES,
MOOSE ON THE LOOSE
AND MUCH MORE...

FORTEAN TIMES 469
ON SALE 19 MAR 2026

STRANGE DEATHS

UNUSUAL WAYS OF SHUFFLING OFF THIS MORTAL COIL



While zip-lining through the forest in the Green Jungle Park eco-adventure resort near the city of Luang Prabang, Laos, Daniel Owen, 47 and his son, Cooper, 15, from Idaho Falls, Idaho, were set upon by a swarm of insects. Both were stung more than 100 times, leaving them in a critical condition. They were rushed to a local clinic, but their injuries were so severe they were immediately transferred to the Luang Prabang Provincial Hospital. Despite this, Cooper died within 30 minutes, and Daniel about three hours later. The insects were later identified as Asian giant hornets, colloquially known as "murder hornets" because their painful venom contains highly active neurotoxins and tissue-destroying enzymes; even one sting is potentially fatal. The giant hornets are usually solitary insects; it is rare for them to form swarms, and still rarer to attack in number. It is thought that multiple hornets had nests in the trees through which the zip line travelled and they were disturbed by the Owens' sudden appearance and rapid movement through their territory. "This event is unprecedented in our experience and, to our understanding, in Luang Prabang as well," a Green Jungle Park spokesperson said. "It was an unforeseeable and extraordinary natural occurrence." *bangkokpost.com, 5 Nov 2025.*

Three teenagers died in Alès in the south of France when their car skidded off the road during a night of heavy rain, crashed through a low garden wall, somersaulted, and landed upside down in a small private swimming pool containing about 1.5 metres (5ft) of water. It appears that the victims survived the crash with minor injuries, but drowned because they could not get out of the car – the pool was almost exactly the same size as the vehicle, and the upturned car fitted snugly inside, making it impossible to open the doors or get out the windows. The car then went undiscovered for several hours as the pool belonged to a local baker, who was on a night shift when the accident happened. "It's truly the height of horror," said Nimes public prosecutor Abdelkrim Grini, in charge of investigating the accident. "It wasn't the impact of the accident that killed them. They found themselves upside down in icy water, unable to get out. They had no chance." *bbc.co.uk/news, 3 Dec 2025.*

91-year-old Petar Lubicic was found dead from massive blood loss at his home in Llanwrthwl, Powys, in October. He had been wandering about his house in bare feet when he accidentally trod on the jagged remains of a broken biro. As he was on blood thinners for a heart condition, his wound bled copiously, and because he was alone in the house, there was no one to call an ambulance or help him stem the hæmorrhaging, so he bled out and died. *D.Star, 21 Oct 2025.*

FALLING TO EARTH

A man from Michigan, Ohio, who received a kidney transplant in December 2024 initially did well, but five weeks after the operation he started to experience tremors, lower extremity weakness, confusion and urinary incontinence. Doctors were baffled as to what was causing these problems and had the man readmitted to hospital, where he was put on a ventilator, but died shortly afterwards. Post-mortem tests revealed that he was suffering from rabies, which baffled his family, as they said that he had not had any contact with animals. Medics then checked the records of the kidney donor, and noted that a couple of months before his death he had been scratched by a skunk. He had been holding a kitten at his rural home when he was approached by a skunk showing "predatory aggression toward the kitten". The man fought back and "rendered the skunk unconscious", but during the scrap he received a "shin scratch that bled". Some weeks later the man started to become confused, had difficulty swallowing and walking, experienced hallucinations and had a stiff neck, then collapsed with presumed cardiac arrest. After several days in hospital, he was "declared brain dead and removed from life support", after which his organs were donated. On rechecking his tissue samples for rabies, almost all came up negative, except biopsy samples directly from his kidneys, which showed an infection "consistent with a silver-haired bat rabies". This suggested there had been a "likely three-step transmission chain" in which a bat infected a skunk, the skunk infected the donor, whose kidney, in turn, infected the recipient, making this only the fourth reported transplant-transmitted rabies event in the US since 1978. *theguardian.com, 9 Dec 2025.*

Thinking of getting an e-bike?

Find the right one for you at the Cycling Electric Demo Day

cyclingelectric
DEMO
DAY

Commuter bikes, cargo bikes, folders, road bikes, kid carriers, hybrids... all ready to ride on a safe, traffic-free circuit with expert advice and assistance on hand

---

Tickets start from £7.20 for the whole day – bring the family!

London, 19th April 2026
Leeds, 7th June 2026
Bath, 14th June 2026
South London, 5th July 2026

Scan for more info, or go to
cyclingelectric.com/demodays

3:00 AM
iPad
Horror in Culture & Entertainment
RUE MORGUE
28 YEARS
UNDERTONE
THE SCARIEST FILM YOU'VE EVER HEARD
CANADA'S NEW INDIE HORROR WAVE
#229
TRAITRS DARKWAVE'S VANGUARD
WORSHIPPING CTHULHU
DOLLY UNLEASHES SLASHER MAYHEM
ALSO INSIDE: MIA BALLARD ON SHY GIRL SALEM'S LOT RETURNS IN 4K BUILD YOUR ULTIMATE HORROR CURRICULUM
MARRS MEDIA INC. RUE-MORGUE.COM
PLEASE DISPLAY UNDER FILM AND VIDEO
5:44 AM

$6.66
PER ISSUE

A
MONSTER
APP

THE **WORLD'S #1 HORROR MAGAZINE**
IS NOW AVAILABLE PRIOR TO NEWSSTANDS ON **iPHONE** AND **ANDROID.**

VISIT RUE-MORGUE.COM, THE APP STORE AND GOOGLE PLAY

FOLLOW US ON **INSTAGRAM, BLUESKY,** AND **FACEBOOK**